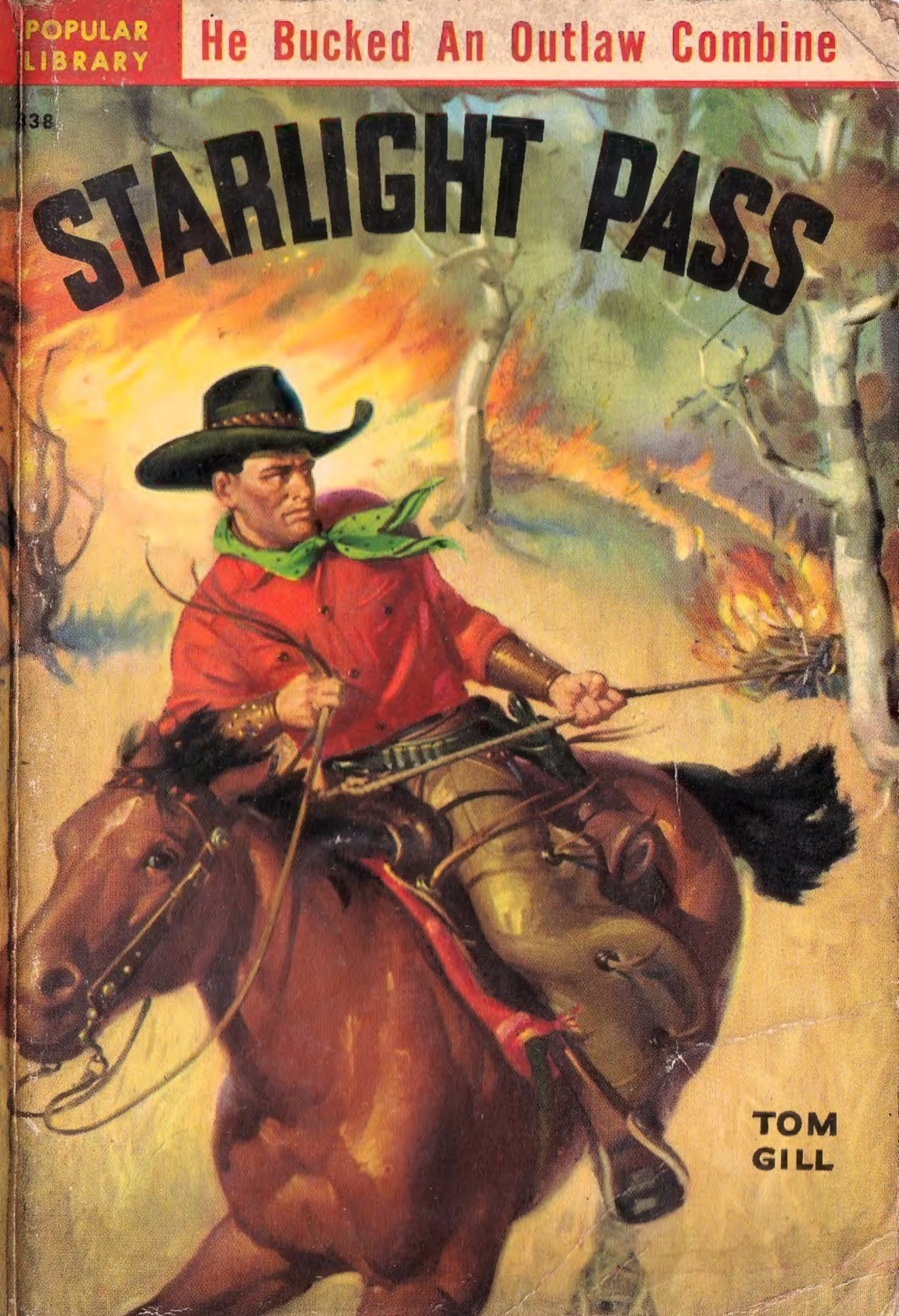
POPULAR LIBRARY

He Bucked An Outlaw Combine

38

# STARLIGHT PASS



TOM GILL

A WESTERN NOVEL

# STARLIGHT PASS

TOM GILL

POPULAR LIBRARY • NEW YORK

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

Copyright, 1934, 1935, by Tom Gill

*Published by arrangement with Murray Hill Books, Inc.*

**This POPULAR LIBRARY book is COMPLETE and UNABRIDGED**

*published in May, 1951*

---

**POPULAR LIBRARY** titles are "BOOKS of PROVEN MERIT" carefully selected from the lists of America's leading book publishers. They represent the work of the world's outstanding writers of fiction and non-fiction.

---

Printed in the United States of America

*All Rights Reserved*

# CHAPTER ONE

"How about the stranger? Would he do?"

Musingly the speaker's eyes rested on a tall, shabbily clothed figure standing in the doorway, then turned again to his companion. "Think he might do, Jean?"

The other shrugged. "*Sapristi!* But certainly he is big enough." His slow voice held the lazy resonance of the north woods. "And see how he walk—soft and sure, as the cat walk."

Curiously their eyes passed down the long room to where, unconscious of their scrutiny, a man stood holding numbed hands before the roaring stove while at his feet a shaggy dog sat picking particles of ice from his paws. Behind him, beyond the frosted door, the cold blue twilight of Wyoming winter had fallen, and already the night wind, biting and bitter cold from countless miles of snowfields, was flowing down below the Pass.

Meanwhile those steadily appraising eyes were fixed not on the gathering twilight outside but on that tall figure bending toward the grateful warmth of the stove.

There was something strange about the man as he stood before the fire. Something not easily defined that made him curiously remote from his surroundings. He seemed in no way to belong to the little logging town perched there among the frozen foothills of the Rockies. And about him a great quietness hovered, a kind of challenge.

At most he could not have been more than twenty-seven, but the thick black eyebrows that met in a heavy horizontal line, the square, clean-cut jaw, made him appear even older. And his face, too, was one of strange contrast. The high-arched nose, full modeled lips and breadth of forehead evoked a sense of strength and decision that the restless eyes and weary droop to the shoulders seemed to contradict. The whole man was a contradiction. Tall, muscular frame, and broad, sloping shoulders —a figure that swept down like a wedge from arching chest to slender, powerful thighs. Yet the pale skin lacked tone, the fingers were not quite steady. Along his left cheek stretched a small, deeply cut scar that might have been a knife wound, and above it the gray cap was pulled low about the eyes and ears. Dressed in the thick woolen garb of the North, his stagged

trousers gave signs of rough usage, and the short mackinaw clung tight about him, as if originally intended for someone else. Once he reached forward to stroke the soft ears of his dog, and for the first time his lips moved in a smile.

Yes, in the leisurely flowing quality of every movement there was something of the cat, and for a full minute the two men watched him, then the one who had first spoken nodded.

"Queer bird. He came up on the stage with me. Never spoke to anybody—sat hunched up on the back seat with that pup of his, and once in a while he'd roll a cigarette. When we stopped at Dubois for dinner he wouldn't even come in—just walked around outside the hotel." Again his eyes rested on that tall, silent figure, then he turned toward the man at his side.

"Think you could stop him in five rounds, Jean?"

Beneath the man's black beard his teeth gleamed in a confident grin. "A word from you, boss, an' I stop him in t'ree."

"Don't be too sure. This fellow looks as if he might know the game. Well, let's see what we can do." Smiling, he asked:

"Staying here in Wolfshead a while?"

With a start the newcomer turned. It was as if the question had awakened him from some remote abstraction, and the dark eyes were suddenly veiled and guarded.

"I hadn't decided, quite."

There was a surprising ease and richness about that voice. It rose resonant and bell-like, as if it came effortlessly from deep within.

"Maybe you and your pup figure on panning a little gold beyond the Pass?"

"Maybe." The tall man looked down at the dog, now contentedly dozing before the fire, and for a second his watchful eyes relaxed.

The brief conversation died, then with a good natured laugh the other added, "Well, that's always been one strong point of this Western country. We try not to be too curious about where a stranger comes from, where he's bound for, or why. But I sat near you on the stage coming up, and my friend and I—" As an afterthought he indicated the big bearded man behind him. "This is Jean L'Abat, woods boss of the North Continental Development Company. My name is Pogue. I happen to be the Wyoming superintendent of the same outfit."

"North is my name," the tall man said briefly.

Again Pogue laughed. "Why not? It's as good as any other."

With awakened interest North looked at him. Straight and exceedingly slender, Pogue scarcely gave the impression of a man in the middle forties except for the graying hair above his temples and the deeply chiseled lines about his mouth. His was the air of one to whom the world has been kind, and from it he had gained an easy assurance and a kind of aggressive affability. But perhaps his most discernible feature was a vaguely sardonic droop to the left eye, while the voice itself, as if in contrast, was carefully modulated—the voice of a man who knew the full value of an engaging personality.

"Well," his smile broadened, "whether you're figuring on heading for the upper country or not, you'll have to spend the night in Wolfshead. There's no stage leaving until after Thanksgiving."

North looked up as if at a fact unexpectedly recalled. "That's right, to-morrow's Thanksgiving."

With a bellow of surprised laughter, L'Abat slapped his thigh. *"Nom d'un nom!* He had even forgotten that." And his white teeth gleamed as he threw his head back in delight.

But Pogue again was speaking. "Our boys up in the timber camps haven't forgotten Thanksgiving. You'll find just about every one of them down from the hills to make a night of it. And that brings me to what I wanted to say." The genial smile broadened. "We always try to work up a little excitement on Thanksgiving eve by staging a prizefight or two, and I've brought up a couple of lightweights from Denver. My trouble is I can't persuade anybody to take a chance with Jean here for the big event. Jean's our local heavyweight. We call him the Grizzly—he's so playful. Last Thanksgiving I got a mankiller from Cheyenne called the Fighting Swede. That battle went seven rounds, and they worked over the Swede two hours before his eyes opened. Since then the bidding to fight Jean hasn't been exactly brisk, and it looks like we may have to disappoint the boys." The drooping eye fixed speculatively upon North. "Then you came in. You're a pretty husky specimen. You ought to stand up against a silver tip. Know anything about boxing?"

"A little."

"It's a break! You help us out, and we won't have to disappoint the boys."

But North shook his head. "No, I haven't boxed for three years. I wouldn't qualify."

"No?" Pogue's scrutiny took in the worn, ill-fitting clothes. "You don't look too prosperous to me. Suppose I make it worth your trouble?"

A spark of interest glinted in North's eyes, and seeing it, Pogue nodded.

"I thought that might make a little difference. Look here! I'll give you twenty-five dollars if you'll stand up to Jean."

"For how long?"

"As long as you can."

"You don't want me to throw the fight?"

"I want you to fight like Hell! Jean will take care of himself in his feeble way."

North looked at his grinning antagonist. Appraisingly he contemplated the huge, heavy form, the bulging shoulder muscles, thick neck and great, knuckled hands. At last he turned

"I'll take you," he said quietly.

"Bully!" Pogue slapped him on the shoulder in high delight. "I'll see that everything's set. Your bout starts around ten o'clock. Better get over at nine-thirty."

"Get where?"

"Sweeney's—anyone will tell you where Sweeney's is. Still—" Pogue drew out a card from his pocket and wrote a few words on it. "Show this at the door. It'll get you in."

With a nod and a smile the two men went out into the night.

Thoughtfully North stood looking after them, then with something that might have been a sigh, he held out his hands to the roaring stove.

"Bounce, old boy," the dog's soft ears rose eagerly at the familiar voice, "it begins to look as if we may eat. If we don't—" He glanced down at his thin, tight fitting mackinaw and walked to the door.

## CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE the night was curtaining a wintry world.

In the snow-piled street the stagecoach still stood, the horses weary from that long pull up the river, resting with lowered heads, the white steam of their breath rising on the cold air. Already lights were palely flickering on the hard-parked snow,

and in the west a last faint afterglow of twilight silhouetted the long line of foothills that rose, range on range, to where the granite turrets of the Rockies towered against a frosty sky. Cold, aloof and unfathomed, that eternal immobility of cliff and windswept snow stretched upward toward the deep defile men knew as Starlight Pass. A world vast and snow-clad, silent but for the crackling aurora, lifeless except for the dotted cabins of the lumber town nestling along the frozen banks of Wind River.

And for that night, at least, Wolfshead was very much alive. From out the hills, from distant river ranches, men were gathering, journeying on skis, snowshoes, horseback and afoot, leaving their solitary cabins to celebrate this first holiday of the long mountain winter. Driven by some inarticulate need, they came to meet with their kind, to drink themselves into forgetfulness of the silent loneliness that lay ahead, to ignore for a space the eternal indifference of granite cliffs. They had come to forget all this, to be men among men again, to warm their blood with liquor, with the thrill of gaming, and a brief tenure of women's smiles. And all these things Wolfshead was careful to provide—especially at Sweeney's.

For Sweeney's was unique. Everything went. Eighty miles from the nearest railroad, it was remote enough to be safe from over-curious state and Federal officers alike. There was always music, a game of red-dog or stud, and a fiery brand of whiskey that none but Sweeney knew the source of,—whiskey that, as Mills, the forest ranger said, "Blazed a two-way trail all the way down." And there were always tired-eyed, red-lipped girls to dance with and buy drinks for as the night grew older. Small wonder, then, that settlers from the Gros Ventre country, miners from the famous Sawtooth Range, ranchers of the Painted Desert, forest rangers, Indians and timber cutters as far north as the headwaters of Buffalo Creek—all these looked to Sweeney's for their annual "bust." And Sweeney never let them down.

You were always welcome at Sweeney's—provided, of course, you had your roll.

So throughout that long afternoon men had been passing in and out the wide swinging doors, and now at the coming of darkness the squat wooden front suddenly blazed with lights in token of the Thanksgiving festival. Even from where he stood. North could hear shouts of laughter and fitful singing that

came floating toward him down the street. Once he glanced up at the electric sign, spelling in flaring letters the word SWEENEY'S, and with a start his thoughts turned to the hulking figure of Jean L'Abat.

Unconsciously he flexed his muscles and raised a tentative hand to the unshaven chin. Flabby. Out of condition. Well, why not? Ironically he smiled at himself. His whole life had been out of condition. And yet—twenty-five dollars. He looked at the clock on the wall. Not yet six.

Walking across the bare hotel lobby, North sank wearily into a chair. He felt sleepy. Sleepy or hungry—which? It seemed an impossibly long time since he had even thought of food, and now the odor of cooking from the room beynod brought an almost physical pain.

Perhaps he slept. Men stamped in from outside, passing with an incurious glance the motionless figure in the chair—just one more drifter bound for the goldfields or looking for work in the woods.

It struck eight. North drew his mackinaw closer about him, and pulling the woolen cap low over his ears, headed toward the lights of Sweeney's. It had grown much colder. Above the distant peaks myriad stars glittered frostily and beneath his tread the frozen snow grated like fine sand.

But Sweeney's was jammed. Directly ahead of North stretched a dance floor, festooned with many-colored streamers, and on one side a gaunt, long-fingered youth played a piano, while in a weak tremolo voice a girl sang some sentimental melody of the south. About the tables men sat in a blue haze of tobacco smoke that caught North by the throat, and near the great stove a silent group of ranchers hunched forward in a game of stud. Beyond rose the click of a roulette wheel. Sweeney's was in full blast.

A place of glare and noise and animal heat. The din of glasses the stamping of heavy feet, the loud, deep voices of men assaulted the air with a chaos of incoherent sound, pierced at times by the violent oath of some unlucky gamester.

North passed with quiet, catlike tread across the floor and as he picked his way among the tables more than one man looked curiously up at that tall figure with the shaggy dog at his heels. A dance-hall girl watched him with half frightened, half fascinated gaze.

"Look at them eyes, wouldja?" she murmured to her partner. "Just look at 'em. I'd sure hate to get him sore at me."

But already in a far off corner North had found an empty chair, and turning his back on the crowd, he fell to reading an old number of the Denver *Post*. For an hour he sat there, detached and utterly removed from the uproar about him, once with a silent shake of the head refusing the invitation of a convivial miner to have a drink. Beside him the dog lay curled and contented.

But now a general movement toward the further end of the room caused him to look up. A wide double door had been thrown open and men were streaming slowly into an even larger room beyond.

North looked down at his dog. "Better stay here, Bounce," he counseled, and joined the crowding throng.

At the doorway an attendant stopped him. "You need a ticket, big boy, for this fight."

North drew out Pogue's scribbled message, and in open amusement the attendant read it, looked with new interest at him, then waved him ceremoniously inside.

It was a large, rectangular room. In its center the familiar squared ring had been roped off, surrounded by row on row of wooden chairs, now rapidly filling with jostling, hurrying men. Already the air was hot and heavy with the presence of many people, and standing with his back to the wall, North looked quietly on.

A curious assemblage. Blue-eyed, light-haired Swedes, and Danes from the north country; miners, pale-skinned and pallid, with red, calloused hands and heavy, stooping shoulders: Arapahoes and Sioux from their reservation down the river; slim cowboys off the foothill ranges, walking in high-heeled boots with characteristic swagger, their gaily colored shirts and scarves lending vivid notes of color to the throng. Everywhere incessant voices, the shuffling of caulked boots, the tinkling of spurs. A blue haze of tobacco smoke hanging like a cloud above the glaring lights.

From outside rose the sound of shouting, a swarming mob of woodsmen came pouring through the door, and North recognized Jean L'Abat towering among them. L'Abat and Pogue were the center of attraction in that noisy, clamorous group, and as they entered, North heard one grizzled miner

mutter in his beard, "Best fighter in the Rockies—and by God, the dirtiest."

But Pogue had already caught sight of North, and leaning to Jean, whispered a few words while the other threw back his head in that flashing, bellowing laugh of his. Followed by the crowd, the two came forward.

Pogue was in high good humor. "Well, I'm glad to see you're all eager and ready to clean up on little Jean here."

At those words the crowd silenced, and Pogue turned to the gaping men behind him.

"Boys, you've got me to thank tonight. I found a playmate for Jean. This gentleman who says his name is North has just arrived in the Wind River country with one purpose in life—to stay a few rounds with Jean L'Abat." In mock grandiloquence Pogue raised his voice. "I take great pleasure in introducing to you the Unknown Wildcat—Terror of the Rockies."

Jean made as if to tremble, and a deep shout of laughter shook the room, causing North's cheeks to glow a deeper red, and his eyes narrowed ever so little. Yet he said no word, but stood quietly smiling, watching his huge antagonist.

Pogue looked around him. "What about the betting, boys? Anybody willing to stake his roll on the Great Unknown? I'm offering five to one he doesn't stay five rounds."

Silence—no takers.

Pogue laughed. "Oh, well then—ten to one. Come on, some of you red-blooded sports. Ten to one he doesn't last five rounds. Is it a bet?"

Pogue's eyes passed challengingly over the circle of faces, but every man shook his head. Then from across the room a low voice answered, "It's a bet, Pogue."

North turned to find himself looking at a slight, spare-figured man dressed in the dark green uniform of a forest ranger. Tanned by storm and sun, the years had etched innumerable fine wrinkles about his eyes, but the eyes themselves were keen and steely gray. For a moment he stood looking with a kind of voiceless understanding up at North, then he nodded.

"I'm just aiming to take that bet to the tune of fifty smackers."

Pogue's eyebrows raised in mock astonishment. "Only fifty? No more than fifty dollars from a representative of the great United States Forest Service? Make it a hundred, Harry, and stand to win something."

But the ranger shook his head. "Depression payrolls don't encourage me to plunge in a big way. Fifty'll have to do," and he passed several bills to the doorkeeper while Pogue, from a huge roll in his pocket, counted out five hundred dollars.

"Covered in full." Pogue's elation was unmistakable. "Fifty dollars hazarded by our genial forest ranger, Mr. Harry Mills, on the prospects of the Great Unknown to stay five rounds with my rough and ready woods boss." Then as if struck by a sudden thought he turned to North. "Why don't you take a chance and bet on yourself? Let's make it fifty dollars or nothing—fifty dollars if you stay five rounds."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't it's just too bad."

About him North heard bantering laughter, saw the skeptical eyes of crowding men, and again color rose to his cheeks.

"All right," he answered.

"Great business!" Pogue laughed outright. "Fifty bucks or nothing for the night's work. Who do you want in your corner? Got any friends here?"

North was about to shake his head when his eyes met the eyes of the ranger and hesitantly he asked, "Would you be willing to act as my second?"

"Glad to." There was no trace of hesitation in that hearty response.

"Now that everybody's happy," Pogue said briskly, "both you gladiators better be getting to the dressing room."

Following the big woods boss, North left the circle of half amused, half pitying faces and passed into a small dressing chamber where already two strapping fellows were unlacing their boxing gloves. Jean spat contemptuously.

"Swedes from up Wind River," he said to the ranger. "Somebody he tell them they can fight. *Gros sac!*" Then to North, "Mebbe one of these trunks fit you. Shoes you find in corner." And without more ado, he began undressing.

Throwing off his coat, North stripped quickly to the waist, then feeling the ranger's eyes speculatively on him, he smiled.

"Why did you bet your roll on me?"

Mills looked up. "Why? Oh, maybe I just felt reckless—we're only middle-aged once." A little note of embarrasment lay in his voice. "Or maybe I thought it was a chance to make some easy money."

"No you didn't. I'll tell you why. You did it because you saw I was alone with all that crowd against me. You thought it would buck me up." Fleetingly his somber eyes softened, and he laid a hand on the ranger's shoulder. "I'm not going to let you down if I can help it."

But even as he spoke North frowned at the reflection of his own naked body in the glass. Well molded and powerful it was, but painfully gaunt, and impatiently he shook his head.

"I wish to God I was in better condition." He groped about among the pile of shoes until he found a pair that fitted him. L'Abat, meanwhile, had slipped on a bathrobe and nodded in arrogant condescension as his own eyes passed over North's six feet of bone and rippling muscle.

"Not bad, *mon ami,* not bad," he said approvingly. "But not much beef. You do not eat enough." He laughed easily. *"Eh bien,* for one, two rounds I play wit' you to amuse the crowd, but at the third—" Jean closed his hand significantly. "At the third 'ave care, for I do not wish that you should last longer."

The insolent confidence of the man whipped the blood to North's face, and for a moment they stood there, silent and unsmiling, eye to eye.

"You may beat me, L'Abat," North answered evenly, "but you won't find much play in it. I'm figuring to stay through this fight without being nursed."

"Then I say you are one fool, my frien' for the minute I decide you 'ave stay too long—" L'Abat snapped his fingers. "That minute—poof—you are done, and all you 'ave to show for your trouble will be one bruised body." With a short laugh he turned and beckoned North to follow.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE BIG ROOM outside was already packed. Every seat had been filled, and as far back as the door men stood crowded shoulder to shoulder down the aisles. Another bout was dragging to a monotonous and indecisive draw, and the two contestants, glad of the last bell, were pulling their glistening bodies through the ropes amid the crowd's disgusted jeering.

But now as those two great robed figures stepped into the ring, quick silence fell, followed by a crash of welcoming approval

when Jean L'Abat strode to his corner and flashed a confident smile about him. From his own corner North watched the man throw off his robe and stand arching a barrel-like chest with conscious self-esteem. Shoulders and chest were dotted with tufts of coarse black hair that added to his feral look, and accented the savage, brutal quality of the man. A heavy body. Too heavy perhaps, but bearlike and powerful. The Grizzly—he was well named.

Mills, the ranger, was watching too. "I'm telling you," he whispered, "you're going to have both hands full."

"I know that." The voice was almost unconcermed.

With growing curiosity Mills regarded North. He was so unbelievably calm—as if it were of no particular importance that just across the squared circle stood an eager antagonist, confident of giving him the battle of his life. But the man beside him seemed not greatly to care, and Mills shook his head, baffled.

"Maybe you know your own business best, but watch him—watch him every minute, and if things get too hot, hang on to him."

Faintly North smiled.

The shouts redoubled as briefly the two men were called together by the referee, then each returned to his corner. Leaning carelessly against the ropes, nodding and waving to friends, Jean L'Abat was plainly enjoying himself, happy as a child in the adulation of the crowd and in the prospect of physical conflict. Twice he lifted up his huge, hairy chest and stretched both gorilla-like arms, while always his teeth gleamed in that supremely confident smile.

Diagonally opposite North stood, motionless and imperturbable, hands hanging idly at his sides, eyes fixed moodily before him, as if even in that tense moment his thoughts were of other things. Each moment the shouting increased. Then sharp and clear the gong rang out.

At the signal North stepped forward, knees flexed, body bent, while in his ears the ranger's parting words still sounded. "Watch him close."

The room had quieted. Only the faint creaking of chairs beneath bodies suddenly grown tense, and the sliding sibilance of leather as both men inched forward, cautious and watchful,

seeking an opening. Jean's head had moved a little to one side, and his hands began slowly weaving up and down, in and out, the smile on his dark face still undisturbed. Then like a cat North leaped and struck. Twice in sharp staccato his gloved hands lashed to the other's jaw, whipping the man's head back, wiping that smile from his face.

Caught unawares, Jean stumbled to the ropes and with a roar of surprise every man had started to his feet. Here was action.

Two red welts stood out just below L'Abat's cheek, and with a snarl he lowered his head and charged. North met that charge. Planted solidly on both feet, he made no effort to avoid the onrushing menace of muscle and clenched fists, and now, toe to toe, shoulders forward, heads bowed, they stood exchanging blow for blow, their fists like vicious flails, sounding to the furthermost ends of the room.

Once North was staggered by a savage jolt full in the face, but he only shook his head and ripped a dozen punishing blows into the body of his scowling antagonist. Twice around the ring they fought. Time had ceased to exist for those two when at last they wrenched apart at the sound of the bell.

Cries of clamorous delight rocked the room, and sinking into his chair, North felt Mills wipe the sweat from his face.

"An even round if I ever saw one," the ranger whispered. "If there was any advantage it's yours. You've got a shade on him—but by God, neither of you can stand that pace for long."

North made no answer. His head was aching dully, and in a kind of numbed surprise he watched the lights, wondering why they flickered so before his eyes. Again the gong.

Like charging bulls both men met in the center, but this time it was L'Abat who struck first. Lunging out with all the strength of powerful shoulder and body, he caught North on the left breast, too high to do harm, but its very impact hurled the man back against the post.

With a growl of savage joy L'Abat rushed. There against the ropes they fought, North, bent back by the other's weight, lashing desperately with right and left, his breathing short and gasping, sweat streaming into his eyes. Yet always he was conscious of that dull aching in his head and of the slow, leaden movements of his feet. Out of condition. Out of condition. Like an accusing refrain the words kept singing in his brain. He

gathered himself, struck wildly and reached Jean's chin as the man lowered his guard. Then once again they closed, but this time it was L'Abat who clinched, clinging desperately to North. In an instant the referee had clawed them apart, and as North broke, L'Abat rammed him twice with his heavy skull.

Confused cries arose from the crowd, and a profane protest from Mills, but the referee waved them on. Once more they clinched, broke, fought fiercely for the fraction of time that remained, then as the gong sounded, staggered apart, wet and glistening with sweat, gasping for breath, haggard and dogtired.

Wonderingly North looked down at his legs—the knees were so weak, so ridiculously trembling. For an instant nausea seized him, and the room reeled. He sank wearily back on the stool in his corner. A man ought to last five rounds against a steam engine. If only those lights wouldn't flicker.

Above the left eye, bruised and swollen, his brow lay open, cut by the impact with L'Abat's skull, and Mills was whispering rapidly in his ear, but North couldn't hear—just a jumble of words. Absently he nodded. What did it matter? After all, the gong was the thing.

And with the gong he found himself once more on his feet moving out toward the center of that brilliantly lighted square. Yet strangely he felt no least sense of motion. It was as if from some remote point of detachment he looked down on this leaden-footed creature that advanced so slowly and jerkily across the floor.

Suddenly Jean L'Abat loomed just ahead of him, dark and glowering, and something within North's battered brain flashed a warning. He must put up his hands. He must get going. But the dark face had drawn nearer to him, and above the clamor of the crowd he caught the low spoken warning. "Now, my frien', 'ave care."

For answer North struck with all his strength, grazing the other's shoulder, taking in return a smashing blow that brought him to his knees. Dimly he could hear men shouting, stamping, saw the white, indistinct ovals of their faces through curtains of misty light and darkness that rose and fell and spun about before his aching eyes. Those damned lights!

Once, above the uproar came Mills' voice. "Clinch with him! Clinch!" But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing

except his throbbing head and that all gone feeling in the stomach. Well, you couldn't eat if you were broke. You couldn't—Voices. Wave after wave of sound kept breaking over him, while through that dazzle of swirling lights the dark face of Jean L'Abat grinned malevolently.

Then for an instant all things cleared. North raised his head, caught sight of L'Abat rushing in to finish him, and crouching, sprang like a maddened panther at his great adversary, beating him back with a volley of body blows, driving him into the ropes, bringing that cursing, stamping mob of men to their feet until now they surged forward to the ring, where these two fought like snarling animals beneath the lights.

Then—North could feel it coming—that mist was closing in again. Something dripped over his cut lip, and he felt the salt taste of it in his mouth. Blood—he must be hurt. Half blinded, he turned, met a crashing impact on his jaw, and fell prone.

As if from some great distance the sound of the referee's counting came to him while he struggled to his feet. About him a pandemonium of sound, but he could see nothing. Once more a smashing blow caught him, lifted him from his feet, and his knees doubled. Shaking his head to rid himself of that blinding pain, North made one last agonized effort. Halfway he rose, faltered, then turning, fell face upon the floor.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Something was licking his hand.

Painfully North opened a pair of throbbing eyes to see the shaggy face of his dog, then a hand touched his shoulder and Mills was bending anxiously over him. From very far away the quizzical, kindly eyes of the ranger brought back a memory, and through bruised lips North murmured, "How many rounds did I last?"

"Not quite three, old timer," the voice answered gently.

North tried to smile. "I'm—an expensive luxury—for both of us." But that mist before his eyes was clearing, and now he saw he was lying on a wooden bench in the dressing room. Through the open door no sound came. The crowd had gone. He sat up, and would have fallen but the ranger caught him.

"Easy," he warned. "You're a long way from one hundred percent."

But North unsteadily had gained his legs. "Let's get out of here," and with Mills' help he drew on his clothes.

As they passed through the darkened room that a few short minutes ago had witnessed his defeat, North stopped, and very slowly he turned to Mills.

"When do they fight here again?"

"Not until next Thanksgiving, son." Understandingly Mills smiled. "You'll have a long wait."

The tall man nodded. "That's one of the few things I've learned to do—wait." Followed by the dog, North stepped outside.

Almost at once the air braced him, and he stopped gratefully to breathe in its frozen freshness, but Mills, thrusting his arm through North's led him quickly down the half deserted street, and at the first corner they halted before a wooden three-story building where, on the top floor, a lighted window gleamed.

The ranger looked up. "Doc's still there. Might not be a bad idea to see him."

"I don't need a doctor."

"That's what you say. Well, just between us, you need something—and it's not another prizefight, either." Then while North still hesitated, he added, "Listen, son. Pride can be a pretty expensive luxury too, sometimes. Anyhow, let's get in out of the cold and talk things over."

Entering a dark passage, Mills led the way up a narrow flight of creaking stairs, and at the first landing opened a door bearing the words, "U. S. Forest Service." Two long lines of wooden files stood against the opposite wall, and in the corner North saw a desk and a surveyor's transit.

Mills pointed to a well worn chair. "Sit down over there. I'll be back in a minute."

Slumping down, North felt that weight of weariness again stealing over him, and he laid his head forward on the desk. The polished wood was cool to his hot brow, and the dully throbbing ache behind his eyes abated when he closed them. Lord, how tired he was! Faintly he heard the light clicking of the dog's feet on the floor. Sleep—that was all he needed—sleep.

He might have lain there for long minutes, but at a slight

sound he roused himself to see standing behind Mills a man of about sixty, his thick white hair worn straight back from the broad forehead. Kindliness and a quiet wisdom lay in the smiling eyes—wisdom and with it a sense of fragility, as of one whose strength lay more in the realm of will than in any robustness of physique. He looked inquiringly into the bruised, discolored face, and as North started to rise, laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Do not move, please," he commanded. There was a lingering trace of accent in the man's voice.

"Thought Doc might like to look you over," Mills explained with elaborate unconcern.

But already the doctor was unbuttoning North's shirt, and carefully, unhurriedly, with stethoscope and long accustomed fingers, he examined the man's chest and shoulders. Once he nodded in satisfaction. "Nothing broken." Then with a little sigh he stepped back.

"You are very weary, no?"

North felt an instinctive response to the quiet, sympathetic voice.

"You have suffered a severe beating—that I can understand, but there is something more." He pressed North's flesh between his two fingers and watched it curiously. "Have you been ill?"

For a second North hesitated. "I had fever in New Mexico."

"Recently?"

"I got out of bed five days ago."

"You have lost much weight—are you hungry?"

"I'm not, but I ought to be. I've only had one meal in the last twenty-four hours."

"And you went into the ring that way?"

"There wasn't a chance to go in any other way."

Mills was looking at North in open wonder. "And they thought you couldn't take it!" Reproach and admiration mingled in the ranger's voice. "Half starved and standing up the way you did to Jean L'Abat. God, if I'd known I'd never let you get inside the ropes."

North's stiff lips moved in the ghost of a smile. "You might have been fifty dollars ahead."

"Oh, to hell with the fifty." Then to the doctor, "Is there

anything I can do to help—anything this man needs?"

The doctor laughed. "Perhaps a little food."

Instantly Mills was buttoning his heavy coat of forest green. "I'll bring back half an ox or so—something that'll stick to his ribs." His eyes fell to the dog. "And yours too, you old pothound." Slamming the door, he hurried down the creaking stairs.

The soft voice with its slightly halting accent was again speaking. "So you fought Jean L'Abat—that huge woodman they call the Grizzly? How long did it last?"

A rueful smile passed over North's discolored face. "I'm not sure. It was less than five rounds anyhow."

Without reply the old physician leaned back and looked at North with frowning eyes.

"It was madness. You do not deserve that magnificent body of yours. And even beyond that you perplex me. For I try to piece together the few fragments I know of you and I find the picture is an irrational one. A man does not leave a bed of fever and in a weakened condition seek out the Wyoming Rockies during the dead of winter. He does not go without food for twenty-four hours and then oppose himself to a fighter the most brutal in any of the logging camps. Here one cannot find a very rational picture, no?"

"It doesn't sound sensible, does it?" North agreed.

The doctor's eyes twinkled at the man's obvious refusal to answer his implied questions, then he shrugged and laid the stethoscope aside.

"It is youth's privilege—" The old physician stopped, for Mills came stamping into the room, a kettle of steaming soup in one hand and a covered plate of what he vaguely termed "mulligan" in the other.

"And believe me, this'll straighten out all the kinks in the old semi-colon," he announced, but as North came forward, the ranger held up a warning finger. "Now, take it easy and don't wolf it. You've got all the time there is. Remember, your stomach's been under the impression your throat was cut for the past day."

The odor of warm food rose irresistibly to North's nostrils, and in spite of his aching body he ate hungrily while the others

smoked. Gradually that gnawing emptiness was leaving him. He felt warmer, the lights had ceased their flickering, and replete at last, North pushed back the empty plate and looked up at Mills.

"The first million dollars I make is yours," he sighed. "Now if I could have a smoke——"

And Mills was just lighting a cigarette for him when the door opened and a clear voice called, "Do forest rangers work all night, or——"

Quickly North threw back the mackinaw about his bare shoulders and turned to find a woman looking down at him with curious and frankly interested eyes. She might have been thirty-five—possibly more. It was difficult to guess her age, for her eyes held a quality of poise and quiet assurance that could only have come from years of living and perhaps from suffering. Strands of silver were intermingled among the thick black hair, lending it a kind of lucent sheen, and softening the face itself. For a moment she stood looking down at North's battered form, then her eyes raised questioningly to the doctor.

"I saw the light and thought Harry might still be working. Is there anything I can do?" Her voice was low and self-contained, a voice of quiet serenity and honest friendliness.

The doctor inclined his head. "This misguided young giant has been trying to combine starvation and prizefighting. The results you see before you."

Again North met those questioning eyes, and in the same second each smiled. It was as if, with that unpremeditated smile, a bond of friendship had been welded between them, and in quick sympathy she stepped forward. Very gently she drew back the coat, and her eyes clouded at sight of the discolored skin beneath.

"You've been badly hurt." North felt her cool fingers on his shoulders. Again she turned toward the doctor.

"Couldn't I help?"

"Yes, you can. Would you please to stay here while I take Harry upstairs to help me prepare something for this sturdy patient of ours?"

"I don't need taking care of," North objected.

She raised a silencing hand. "Of course you don't. But you might just as well resign yourself to it, for I'm much too interested to go." And she sat looking at him with those smiling,

slightly mocking eyes until the door closed behind Mills and the doctor.

"This couldn't be better." She leaned comfortably back in her seat. "A good looking man who has to stay where he is because the doctor says he mustn't move." And at her low laughter North was conscious of a feeling of pleasure and a sense of her unaffected comradeship.

"I'm Helen Guthrie." It came as a kind of afterthought. "Wife of the forest supervisor here."

The silence that followed echoed the unspoken question in her eyes, and at length he answered, "I'm Corrin North."

"From——?"

"I thought you didn't ask that question in the West?"

"Women do, my friend—everywhere."

"I'm from nowhere in particular," he replied.

"And bound for nowhere in particular—or for the goldfields beyond the Pass?"

"Perhaps the goldfields."

Helen Guthrie looked at him reflectively. "Well, we all love mysteries. That may be one of the reasons why I find you so interesting."

"But there's nothing mysterious about me."

"No? I wonder!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

A MEDITATIVE lull fell while the woman watched the smoke of North's cigarette curl upward. From outside no sound came, except once the gay tinkle of sleigh-bells and the crunch of brittle snow beneath a horse's hoofs. Over at Sweeney's the night was still young and the men of the lumber camps were holding high wassail, but of this no sound came into the little office where, by the heat of the fire, those two sat.

It was North who broke the long silence. "Have you ever—" he tried to keep his voice casual, "have you ever known a girl here named Catherine Mirov?"

"Of course. That was her father, Doctor Mirov, who is attending you." She leaned closer toward him. "So you've known Cass Mirov?"

"She lives here—still?"

The woman nodded.

"Tell me about her." Despite himself North could not keep the note of eagerness from his voice.

Abruptly Helen Guthrie rose. "I've always wondered why men—all men, without exception—adopt just that particular tone whenever they speak of Cass. I suppose for one thing it's because she's an unforgettable sort of person."

North's eyes were on the blackness of the night outside. "I heard a man say of her once that she was more alive than anyone he had ever known."

"Oh, but she's more than that." The woman stared into the fire. "One can't analyze her. Cass changes too swiftly. And yet she has a fatality for all men. I sometimes think there is in her something of the woman that every man has longed for and never found. Tell me—I'm old enough not to be a competitor—what is it about her attracts you males with such depressing regularity? Is it that changeable, tempestuous quality of hers—that 'who cares for tomorrow' quality?"

Without waiting for an answer she added, "I've known Cass Mirov ever since—when? Well, more years ago than any woman wants to remember. She was just a long, lanky child then, with dusky hair and big, shadowy violet eyes and a gift for silence—the kind of silence that asked questions you're never sure how to answer. And I've seen her grow into a troubling kind of beauty that every man is sensitive to—every one of them, including my own dear middle-aged husband. In some ways Cass has never stopped being a child—I almost think she still believes in Santa Claus and fairy godmothers."

"But not always," North offered softly.

"No, not always. Sometimes she's older than the Sphinx. I've seen her in moments of wild outbursts, too, angry tempestuous rebellion when life doesn't give her what she wants. I wonder if you've ever seen that side of her—or don't you know her well?"

"I often wonder whether I know her at all." She waited for him to say more, but apparently changing his mind, North looked down at the dull glow of his cigarette, and comprehending, Helen laid her hand on his.

"My poor friend," the voice was both mocking and regretful. "It might be better for your peace if you left Wolfshead tonight and went back to wherever your home is, Corrin North. North. The name fits you—cold and distant and mysterious. Well, that

may be all the better. For I'll tell you a secret. No woman was ever able to resist mystery. You men have too little of it."

"Too little of what?" The voice came from the door, where Mills stood with an armload of wood.

Helen Guthrie laughed. "Too little of every desirable quality, Harry. Didn't you know that?"

With new interest North watched the straight, spare figure of Doctor Mirov as he came into the room. The old physician's eyes were a little weary, as one who has looked for long years on human suffering, but his lips were never far from a smile. It was as if he regarded life as some vast spectacle whose tragic aspects it was his role to mitigate. Beckoning to the woman, he handed her a basin filled with some colorless fluid. "Hold this for me. I wish to sterilize these cuts, but not to burn him."

Silently the two went about their task while Mills put wood on the fire. The liquid stung for a second, but almost at once the pain diminished. At last the woman stepped back, and head to one side, looked closely at North, then nodded in satisfaction.

"There. That's a great deal better. How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"Where's our patient going to sleep, Harry?"

With the offhand hospitality of the West, Mills replied, "He sleeps right here. I've got blankets from last year's fire-fighting crew down in the basement, and we'll make a swell bed on the floor. I use them myself when I get behind in my reports —the same being my normal condition."

Mirov nodded. "It's just the thing. For remember," he cautioned North, "you must not be active for another day. No more worlds to conquer, my young giant—not yet. And soon, thanks more to that body of yours than to your judgment, you will be as good as new." Picking up his medicine case, Mirov opened the door.

"Do you go too?" he asked Helen.

Still looking at North, she pulled on her heavy gloves. "Can you keep out of mischief for a few hours, Mr. North from Nowhere?" And without waiting for an answer she ran down the stairs.

Mills' eyes followed her, "If they only made more of 'em like Helen Guthrie I'd be tempted to quit poisoning myself with my own cooking," he confided. "I've known some women in my time—not many, but some—and most of 'em were more cussed

than the others." His voice trailed into silence and he stalked from the room to appear a few moments later with a huge bundle of blankets.

"Four of these under you will make it soft enough, and a couple over you will be plenty. But it's going to be plum' cold here before morning."

He began to arrange them on the floor, then folded still another and laying it in a corner, looked toward the dog. In grateful response the animal wagged a bushy tail, and stepping gingerly upon the soft wool, made two complete circles and curled up for the night. Mills' eyes were smiling, and kneeling, he scratched the dog's head. At last he rose and stretched.

"Thanksgiving. Another day of rest when the carefree forest ranger can loaf along with about nine hours' work." He peered into the stove. "Don't bother about this fire. I'll make it in the morning." He pulled his cap well down about his ears. "Now is there anything you want?"

But North had risen and walked toward him. "Yes," he answered quietly, "I want to repay you somehow for backing up a solitary man when all the world was yapping at him like a pack of wolves." The voice was very earnest and his eyes were glowing. "I want to thank you for all this, but I haven't the least idea how I can." His hand had fallen to the ranger's shoulder, and he saw the growing embarrassment on Mills' face.

"Oh, Hell. Forget it. I'm a regular Jack the Giant Saver by profession. Why I'm so covered with boy-scout medals for good deeds that I'm plum' lop-sided. See you in the morning." And to shut out any further display of gratitude, he stamped down the stairs.

Left to himself North sank back upon the blankets and for a time his brooding eyes were fixed on the little stove, now crackling lustily in the corner. Once, moving his head quickly, he winced with pain, and his mind returning to that brilliantly lighted ring in Sweeney's, caused the edges of his mouth to grow grimmer. The lonely, hunted look had crept back into his eyes—the level, passionless gaze of the lone wolf that neither asks nor gives. Minutes passed. The sounds from down the street had ceased long since, but still he sat there gazing into space. At last, putting out the light, he laid his aching body down upon the blankets.

He was still asleep when Mills kicked the fresh snow from his boots next morning and opened the door. The fire was dead and the coldness of early winter had crept within the little office as quietly the ranger raised the shade and in the light of a slanting sun looked down upon the sleeping man.

North had not stirred. Face half buried in the blanket, he lay, one arm stretched upward above his head, so that only the profile was visible, revealing that straight white scar against the skin of his cheek. Like smoke in the bitter cold, his slow, deep breathing rose, while the dog, still curled in his corner, greeted Mills' entrance with a tentative wag. Curiously Mills looked down at North's face, now in full repose. Yes, there was a fineness about it—a fineness of blood or of breeding, an indefinable quality that lay neither in the square line of jaw nor in the high arched nose. Something of the wild thing, too—the sensitive nostrils, the sense of alertness that even sleep could not wholly veil. And yet over the calm face and powerful body was something that obscured and dulled the fineness of it, until Mills found himself thinking of a mirror, vapor covered, so that one saw into it, but dimly. Even as he stood contemplating that sleeping figure North stirred restlessly, and through half parted lips spoke a name, too low, too rapidly for Mills to catch. The next moment he awoke.

## CHAPTER SIX

INSTANTLY the opening of those eyes transformed him. Once more watchful and alert, once more on guard against—Mills wondered—against what?

"Sleep well?"

"Fine." North raised a hand to his face, touching his bruised lips and forehead. "Am I still badly smashed?"

"You're not exactly all the well dressed man should be, but you look a sight better than last night. I've got a razor over in the corner. You can shave if you want, then we'll go out to breakfast."

But at that last word North sat up among the blankets. "Look here. You've been good enough to me already. I've fallen down on you, lost money for you, and I'm not going to sponge any more meals from you. I'm broke, Mills. I haven't a cent, and I don't know where I'm going to get one. I'll never forget all

you've done for me—everything—but you better go out for your own breakfast. By the time you get back, I'll be gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know." North looked toward the window. "Up in the hills somewhere."

Without replying Mills kindled a fire in the stove, then seated himself by North's side. "Listen, old son. I know pretty well how you feel—but I've lived a bit longer than you have and the world has cooled me down a lot. Now this weather ain't exactly springlike, and those hills may look close but they're a long ways off for an empty stomach. Let's make sure of breakfast first, and later we can talk it all over." There was an air of gentle finality in the ranger's tone, and North drew on his socks.

Outside a cold, watery sun glittered over that world of snow, and a west wind from out the Rockies stung North's face. They walked rapidly, hands deep in their pockets, and unconsciously North filled his deep chest with the thin, tingling air. Approvingly Mills chuckled.

"A great thing to have youth and health—even if it's sometimes combined with a starvation diet. Well, here's where we take care of the old tummy." He glanced down at the dog. "And yours too, old timer. What's his name?"

"Bounce."

Mills laughed. "We'll sure see that you're taken care of, Bounce."

"Like dogs?"

"Boy, if you'd lived among loggers and tie cutters as long as I have, you'd admire coyotes."

Together they turned into a restaurant opposite Sweeney's, where North ate with an appetite made keen by his recent fast.

"It's sure worth the price to see you pack it away," Mills commented. "I'll get you some cigarettes."

But North shook his head. "Let me roll one of yours."

Mills produced papers and a bag of tobacco. "Thank God there are a few left who can twirl a pill in this degenerate age. It's getting so now even a forest ranger won't smoke anything but ivory tips or a half bushel pipe decorated with initials of the dear old alma mater."

So for a time they smoked, then abruptly Mills leaned forward. "North," he began, "out here we don't ask many ques-

tions. We don't aim to dabble too much in any man's life, for we figure he has a right to choose his own particular trail to heaven or hell. After all, that's his business. But once in a while someone comes along who looks as if he'd strayed into the wrong pasture—kind of as if life might have hobbled him out and made it hard for him to get back to his home range." The ranger stopped.

"You mean me?"

"Yes, I mean you, if you won't take offence."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, maybe because—well, it's none of my business, but I've seen a good bit of life—good times and lousy times—and about the only thing that seems plum' sad to me is a waste of the stuff life's made of. Maybe I'm trying to say that the first time I set eyes on you I knew you had good stuff in you. I knew you were a man to bank on."

"So you banked on me—and lost." The voice still held an overtone of bitterness.

"Let's forget about that. You put up a scrap they'll all remember hereabouts—especially Jean L'Abat. The important thing now is—what are you going to do with yourself?"

For an instant North seemed to be struggling with an impulse to speak. It was a moment tremulous with some undivulged revelation, but it passed in silence, and as if he already regretted the impulse, North answered simply, "What I need right now is a job."

"That's what I thought. I'd sure like to put you on as a forest guard, but there's no chance of that until next fire season. Your best bet for a job is the company. They're taking on men by the dozens."

"What company?"

"The North Continental—Pogue's outfit, the biggest in the Rockies. They own all the land around here. They're cutting the forests at the head of Dunoir Creek, and Little Warm Spring Creek, laying a railroad up Wind River, and aiming to do things in a big way generally. Ever worked in the woods?"

"I've spent a good part of my life in the forest."

Incredulous surprise touched Mills' face. "You sure don't show any of the brands of a lumberjack. Still—" He looked at his watch. "There ought to be someone over at the commissary today. Go brace 'em for a job. At least they'll remember you."

A curious smile had come to North's lips, and his dark eyes were glowing.

"Why not?" he asked; then for no apparent reason he laughed. "It's worth trying—I'll see you back at the Forest Service office." Taking up his hat, he left the room.

Walking with a slight limp from the night's encounter, North passed down the street and out toward the edge of the little town. Not many were abroad that bright Thanksgiving morning, and Sweeney's was closed—it was much too early for the turbulent life that went on behind those closed doors. Two blocks farther on North stopped before a large, rough building made of spruce planks, bearing the words, "North Continental Development Company." Smoke was rising from the chimney, and without knocking, he pushed open the door.

Inside a dozen men, dressed in rough woolens and wearing the high pacs of the lumberjack, were seated about a glowing stove, and as North entered the little group looked up at him with frankly interested eyes. The nearest grinned.

"Just talkin' about you, buddy. We was wonderin' what happened to you after last night." His eyes searched North's swollen face. "You sure took it, pardner, you took it and gave it back like a fightin' cat, but you just wasn't good enough."

"Not quite good enough," North agreed soberly. "And right now I'm wondering if I'm good enough to get a job with this company."

"Lookin' for work, eh?" The man jerked his thumb toward a closed door. "Why don't you go tell the boss about it?" With a wink to the others, he added, "Maybe you'll find an old friend there."

North knocked, and at a gruffly shouted order, opened the door. Inside he faced a narrow, smoke-filled office, its walls covered with blueprints of maps, the floor of unstained pine boards. A wintry light was struggling through the dingy window where two men sat, and as they raised their heads, North recognized Pogue's lean face, and across the desk the dark, heavy features of his woods boss, Jean L'Abat.

At sight of North Jean bellowed a shout of amusement and surprise.

"*Sapristi,* my frien'!" He half rose. "You come back for another fight so early?" He laughed loudly at his own witticism, and nodded significantly across the desk toward Pogue.

North smiled easily. "No, it's not a fight I'm after, this morning. It's a job."

At the last word Pogue looked up with the first sign of interest, then opening a drawer, took out a number of indexed cards.

"I ought to do something for you," his genial voice agreed. "You made fifty dollars for me last night in short order. Let's see. I need a cook for Camp Four. Can you cook?"

"No."

The drooping eye returned to the cards. "Draftsman—that would hardly be in your line. A clerk in the store—you'd have to be bonded for that——"

"I want a job in the woods."

"Oh, a regular he-man job. Can you handle an ax and saw?"

"Yes."

"Drive a team?"

"Yes."

Pogue glanced at L'Abat. "Think you could use this husky, Jean? We're going to need more swampers over toward Lava Mountain."

The big woods boss rubbed his chin. *"Tiens—"* He hesitated. "Why not? It might be——"

But Pogue, as if struck by some passing thought, silenced Jean with a motion of the hand and turned toward North, his face suddenly serious. "I can give you a job, but we might as well understand each other at the start. We've got no time to waste on lame ducks. This is a big outfit, and it's going to be even bigger." He emphasized the words with a glance at the map above his desk. "What we're doing here in Wyoming is only a beginning. And timber is only a part of it—we've got mines and water power. Each year we're expanding." A note of possessive pride sounded in Pogue's voice, and one could sense how much this enterprise and its future meant to him. Lightly his long fingers touched the map. "A few years and all that will be ours. I'm telling you this because I can't decide offhand whether or not you're just a drifter. I know you're not the same sort of stuff that comes in here looking for a job as swamper or logger, but I can't quite figure you out. Well, Jean'll be able to size you up inside a few days. If you make good, I'll see to it that you get your chance. How soon can you start?"

"Right now."

"Tomorrow's time enough. Come here tomorrow at eight and report to Jean. We'll stake you to some tools and bedding." Pogue looked across at his woods boss. "Is that O.K., Jean?"

Docilely the other took his cue. "You come see me," he said. "We start tomorrow."

But Pogue's gaze was still fixed questioningly on North. "I'd give something to know why you pick a tough job in the winter woods instead of one in town."

Guilelessly North smiled back. "Maybe it's the scenery," he suggested, and reached for his hat.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

MILLS was jubilant when he heard the news.

"Everybody's talking about the way you waded into the Grizzly last night, and that ain't going to hurt you a bit when you get back into the woods with them bohunks. By the way, my boss, the supervisor, just called. You met his wife last night. He wants me to bring you over to dinner."

"I can't go looking this way."

"Why the hell can't you? They're not asking you up to be admired. Besides, I want you to meet the boss. You'll like him."

"Who is your boss?"

"Jack Guthrie—the forest supervisor. The gent that runs this here particular forest. He came from the East originally—college stuff and all that—but he's lived here long enough to overcome those handicaps." Visibly Mills warmed to his subject. "Guthrie was a flyer in the big war—got a couple medals he never wears. Not quite so big a man as you, but he's one hundred per cent dynamite and a scrapper all through. He had to be, or this damned corporation would've taken his shirt and scanties." Mills glanced at his watch. "Well, we've got hours yet. You sit down and rest the old frame. I'm going downstairs and crack a load of firewood."

"Can I help?"

"Not a bit."

Left to himself, North walked to the window and for a time stood looking out across the snowy miles that stretched beyond the curving banks of Wind River and up to where the peaks

of the Rockies glittered against a cobalt sky. An endless universe of snow. Along the lower slopes of the foothills he could see green ramparts of pine rising unbrokenly to timberline, and above, dimly outlined in the glittering distance, jagged, winding ravines that led back into the very heart of the Rockies. It was up there he was going, up where men were cutting their way into the forests. Unconsciously he breathed deeper, and picking up a Forest Service scale book from the table, touched its leather binding with a kind of wistful fondness. Then once again North paced the length of the office until at the sound of a light footstep outside he turned and faced the door.

Slowly it opened.

*"Cass!"* The word burst from him like a cry. For the first time in weeks North's eyes lighted and he felt his heart pounding.

There, framed in the doorway, a girl stood. Slender and dark-haired, dressed in the woolen mackinaw of Wyoming winters, she paused in trembling amazement, her shadowed eyes upon him, her lips a little parted, and now as one who awakens from a trance she raised a tremulous hand to her throat.

It was a gesture that carried North back to a place that was not Wyoming, and to a time that was not winter, and his heart tightened with an old memory. Silent, immobile they stood, beyond the reach of words while the blood receded from her cheeks, leaving the skin creamy white, like ivory.

"You've come!" There was something of accusation in the soft-spoken syllables, something too of regret. But looking down at her, North made no answer, and again the soft voice. "You've come at last. I thought you had forgotten."

"Men don't forget you easily, Cass."

The blood was flowing back into her cheeks, and even beneath the heavy mackinaw one could sense the quickened rise and fall of her breasts. A few particles of flying snow had caught in the dark coil of her hair and clung there, white and imponderable. Still North watched her without a word. It was hard to realize that he was standing face to face with her at last. He wanted to take the small, proud head between his hands, to feel again the living warmth beneath that satin skin, but he only stood there, hands at his sides, motionless, scarcely breathing, a great hunger in his eyes.

And strangely in that silent unforgettable moment, the mem-

ory of Helen Guthrie's words came back to him. "She has a fatality for all men."

"What are you thinking?" she asked, in a voice that was almost a whisper.

He shook his head. "Remembering, not thinking. Remembering a time when living was a great adventure for both of us, and you——"

A sound that was half a sob choked him.

"Please don't." He saw in wonder that her eyes were bright with tears.

"You would rather I forgot those days?"

"Corrin, I have to——"

Footsteps were coming up the stairs, and with a quick gesture the girl placed a finger to her lips commanding silence just as Mills entered, laden with firewood. The ranger's face lighted at sight of the girl.

"Howdy, Cass. Looking over our new patient? Where's Doctor Mirov?"

With an effort she smiled. "An Indian woman down the river decided to have a baby two hours ago."

"Always thinking of their own comfort," Mills growled, and laid the wood behind the stove.

Only with difficulty was she able to keep her voice from trembling. "Dad sent me over to see how—" her eyes rose to the tall man before her— "Mr. North was getting on and to change that bandage on his shoulder."

North's lips moved stiffly. "I'm quite well again."

"But Father wants me to see if that dressing——"

"I'm sure it's all right."

Curiously Mills looked up. "This girl's as handy with bandages as her dad," he offered, and baffled by the tense silence that had fallen between those two, he fell to petting North's dog.

The girl walked slowly to the door, then looked irresolutely back. "You must—let my father see you." The slightly slanting eyes were frankly pleading, the mouth was as the mouth of a child. Her little hand tightened, her voice died suddenly away, and turning, she fled down the steps.

And North had not yet regained his old composure when Mills announced it was time to leave for Guthrie's.

As they turned up the path to the supervisor's house, Helen Guthrie stood in the doorway holding out her hand, and again

North felt the frank friendship in the firm clasp and the direct, level gaze that seemed to neither judge nor condemn. Behind her stood Jack Guthrie, her husband.

Supervisor Jack Guthrie, his friends had always said, looked more like a retired army officer than a forest supervisor. Tall and very erect, a white, close-cropped moustache, heavy gray eyebrows and thick white mane of hair emphasized his military bearing. His words, when he spoke, were rapid, short and incisive, yet the voice itself was ever ready to break into a laugh, and now, in frank admiration, his eyes passed over the younger man's form.

"So this is the fire-eater all Wolfshead is talking about?" Guthrie led them both inside. "The only thing that surprises me is that Jean L'Abat beat you fairly. He has the reputation of never enjoying a victory unless it's won by some dirty trick."

"He beat me fairly enough," North answered. "I couldn't stand up to him."

"The reason being," Mills cut in, "that he'd had nothing to eat for a couple days."

"Yes, Helen told me. Why did you fight him in that condition?"

"To get something to eat."

"I see. You were broke. Well, I've been that way myself, more than once."

"We're always broke," his wife laughed. "Any forest officer with more than fifty dollars in the bank bears investigation. But how's Mr. North from Nowhere?"

"Why from Nowhere?" her husband asked.

"Because if you ask him where he's from, he just points south. It might, of course, be either Colorado or Brazil."

"It might," North agreed, and catching the twinkle in her eyes, he too smiled.

So with that innate unconscious hospitality of the West, they accepted him, made him forget that he sat penniless and a stranger at their table. Mills especially, drawing from an apparently inexhaustible fund of reminiscences, kept the talk going throughout the meal. Once, Guthrie leaned toward North.

"I can't get out of my head the impression that I have seen you somewhere before. I don't know where or when. I have a vague recollection of crowds of men around us, and you among them."

North's eyes were veiled. "I've spent a good part of my life in New Mexico," he answered noncommittally. "It may have been down there."

But Guthrie shook his head. "I never get down there. That part of the country belongs to another Forest Service Region. Nearest I ever came to New Mexico was northern Colorado. I was supervisor there for years. That's where we first met Mirov and his daughter Cass."

North looked quickly up, and smiling, Helen said to her husband, "I'm sure Mr. North would like to hear about them."

"About the Mirovs? There's not a great deal to tell. The doctor himself is Russian—although you can barely tell it by his speech. Some say he was once one of the great imperial court physicians, but he got into difficulties with the Czar and had to leave. He came to America and somewhere in the East he married an American girl. The old fellow never talks of his wife or of what happened after that. I only know she died while Cass was very young and Mirov left the East forever." Guthrie turned toward his wife. "Remember the night we first saw him, Helen? He got off a stage coach in the middle of a Colorado winter with Cass and a case of medical instruments as his only worldly capital. Later he drifted up here and Pogue made him company doctor. There's a lot of people in this country who owe their lives to Doc Mirov."

"And to Cass," Mills added.

"She helps him?" North asked.

"She'll buck the wildest blizzard to help some sick lumberjack or sheepherder. And the way she can give you Hell if you don't take her dad's prescriptions is nobody's business. Never say anything against Cass Mirov up this way or every tie cutter and ranger in the country will climb your frame."

"When did you come up from Colorado," North asked Guthrie.

"This fall."

"You mean the Forest Service had no supervisor here until then?"

"Not until then."

"And before that?"

Guthrie smiled. "Before that Pogue and his outfit had everything their own sweet way. When we took hold we put things on a different basis—they've got to pay for what they cut now,

and we've made them stop slashing the forests right and left. That's one reason they don't love us too well."

"That's why," Mills added, "they're not overlooking a single dirty deal to put us in a hole. It's not only the timber they want but the minerals and the water power. They've been running sheep on government land for years, and we stopped that too, so they love me like a gopher loves a rattlesnake." He grinned. "I've worked as a ranger up and down the Rockies for nearly twenty years, and before that I used to boss a gang of convict labor, but I'll tell the world this cockeyed outfit is the toughest and the orneriest I ever tried to throw a cinch across."

Helen Guthrie watched them, a little smile on her lips, for she alone had noticed how deftly North turned the conversation each time it veered around to himself.

"Is all this work under Pogue's direction?" North was asking.

"Bert Pogue," Guthrie answered, "is head of the company's holdings in Wyoming. He's one of their coming men and probably slated to be their next director. We're not very friendly—for many reasons—but I can't help having an admiration for the driving power behind him. He knows where he's going. He's a man without fear."

"And without scruples." The last words were added quietly by his wife.

Mills nodded, as if in confirmation of her appraisal. "Yes, he's feared and hated by a good many around here, especially the settlers, but there's no one willing to stand up to him. And when it comes to a showdown, there isn't any of his men won't fight for him. He's a hard man and a cruel one too, but he's not afraid of human or devil. I've seen him act plum' white. Take old Doc Mirov. Pogue's been a good friend to him. He won't let any younger medico even get a foothold in this town."

"Perhaps," the supervisor concluded, "Pogue's like most of us—the usual mixture of good and bad, of aspiration and mistakes."

Across the table Guthrie's wife smiled at him. "It's that sort of thing makes you lovable, Jack, but it certainly doesn't lead me to think you a great judge of men." Laughing, she rose and led the others back into the living room.

Time passed quickly in that atmosphere of easy friendliness, and it was with real regret that North took Helen Guthrie's hand that night to say good-by. Across the room Mills and

the supervisor were talking, and with a quick glance toward them, she asked in a low voice, "Have you seen her?"

"Who?"

"Don't fence. You know who I mean."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

North nodded.

"I thought you had." Her voice was neither gay nor sad, but seemed to hold a kind of puzzled wonder. "I haven't yet decided what brought you into this country, Corrin North, whether it was love of Cass Mirov or hatred of someone else." Her eyes were serious and a little foreboding. "I only hope you won't bring unhappiness, either to her or to yourself."

"Do you think I will?"

"Who can tell? You're the kind of man strange destinies cling about. You are very strong, and the strong are pitiless toward the weaknesses we poor ordinary mortals possess." The clasp upon his hand tightened as the others joined them.

"Good luck," she said, and smiled, but there was a lingering shadow of sadness in the woman's eyes.

Together the two men walked back to the Forest Service office, but at the door Mills stopped.

"Let's meet at the old beanery for breakfast," he said in parting. "I pull out for the ranger station after that, and you'll be going over to the commissary, but we'll meet back in the timber before many days. Remember, it's part of my job to keep you bohunks from turning this forest into a blithering desert. Happy dreams."

But that night North slept without dreams, and next morning when he walked along the snow-packed street toward the office of the North Continental, he thought with a little smile of Mills.

"Glad you've got a job?" the ranger had asked him as he left.

Of course he was glad. A man without some place in the scheme of things was like a stray dog. But now he would be part of the world's work again. He would get out into the timber, carry on the pioneer work of subduing an untouched wilderness and bend it to the will of man. Out of those century-old forests he would be helping to create homes for men, ties

for their railroads, timbers for ships of the seven seas. Of course he was glad. Unconsciously he walked with a lighter step, and already something of the loneliness had gone from his eyes. He thought of Mills, of the new friendship formed, and of Helen Guthrie's understanding smile. He would see them both again —many times.

And as they walked through the frosty morning Bounce too seemed to sense North's high spirits and frisked among the piled snowdrifts, ears forward, tail high in the air, looking back to make sure his master was following. Yes, it was good to be part of the world again, good to be going back to the forests, and best of all to be nearer Cass.

At the commissary North kicked the snow from his boots, and with a nod to the storekeeper, held out cold hands to the welcome heat of a glowing stove.

"I'll be needing an outfit for the hills," he began, but with a jerk of his thumb the other pointed to the back office.

"Boss wants to see you right away."

Walking the length of the room, North found Pogue seated before the window.

With a frown the older man looked up.

"Close the door." His long fingers tapped nervously on the desk. "Doctor Mirov tells me you know his daughter. Why didn't you say something about that to me?" His voice had sunk to a suspicious growl.

The insolence of his tone, the glowering hostility in that drooping eye roused North to quick anger. "Why should I tell you? What has that to do with my wanting a job?"

"That's just what I'm wondering. But there's one thing I'm sure of. Catherine Mirov can't be very proud to have a bum like you on her visiting list, and I'm not going to make it harder for her by keeping you in this country." He looked up with unfriendly eyes.

"You better be moving."

North's gaze rose from the man's face to where beyond the window the snowy slopes of the Rockies gleamed. For a time he seemed to be meditating on something that had no place in the smoke-filled office.

"That's all right about the job," he said at last. "But you're not worried about Catherine Mirov being ashamed of me. Why go to the trouble of lying about it?"

"You better take my word for it." A newly menacing note sounded in Pogue's voice. "She doesn't want a tramp prowling around Wolfshead boasting he's a friend of hers."

North's eyes darkened. With a single step he leaned across the desk, his face thrust close to Pogue's.

"I wouldn't say that again."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't feel like taking much from you." The words were spoken slowly and evenly, the voice was low, almost gentle, but instinctively Pogue pushed back his chair, for a light in North's eyes gave warning that his self-restraint had come perilously near the breaking point. With deliberate slowness Pogue opened the desk drawer, and North caught sight of a black object lying there.

"Better not touch that," he advised, "or I may have to hurt you."

Pogue's hand hesitated, then dropped to his side, but another ally was already on his way. A fat, florid-faced man had just entered the commissary, and with a short nod to the clerk, hurried into the office. The badge on his vest announced him to be sheriff of Wolfshead and at sight of Pogue he touched his hat very respectfully, then turned belligerently to North.

"Been lookin' for you." His watery eyes blinked up at the tall man before him. "I just wanted to tell you we can get along without you in these parts."

"Who do you mean by 'we'?"

The sheriff cast a dubious glance at Pogue, as if seeking counsel, but the other had turned toward the window.

"We don't want no trouble up here," he countered.

"Who told you I was here to make trouble?"

"Now listen," the blustering voice began, but impatiently Pogue's hand struck the desk.

"I told him. I'm responsible for what goes on in those camps, and what kind of people come into them. The sheriff isn't here to explain his reasons. He's here to tell you to get going and that's enough."

North said nothing. It was all so clear. Pogue held both this swaggering sheriff and the town of Wolfshead itself in his hand. Again he looked at Pogue and saw the suspicion and uneasiness lurking behind the man's eyes.

So for a tense, fateful moment those two faced each other

across the narrow desk, and in that moment destiny, with a single gesture, altered the drama of both their lives.

A step sounded in the doorway, a shadow fell within the room, and together the three men turned to see Catherine Mirov standing on the threshold. North's eyes softened, but before he could speak, Pogue had stepped to the girl's side.

"I told you not to come here this morning," he protested.

"That's why I came." Her voice was dangerously quiet, her eyes, meeting North's in some inarticulate communion burned brighter, and in eager expectancy her lips parted. But North himself broke the silence.

"Do you want me to go away from here, Cass?"

"Of course not. Why should you go away?"

Hurriedly Pogue stepped between the two.

"I'd rather you didn't adopt just that tone to Miss Mirov."

"Why not?"

"Because she is going to be my wife."

Like a stricken animal North whirled, his unbelieving eyes on the girl. "Is that true?"

She did not answer, and raising her face in his hand, he forced her to look up at him. "Cass, is that true?"

But already he knew, even before she nodded, even before her lips moved to say, "Yes." And at that softly spoken word the hopes, so high an hour ago, the dreams of taking his place among men, of becoming once more a part of human living—all that was gone. His tight-clenched fingers whitened while silently he fought within himself for self-control, and when at last North raised his face the light had died from his eyes and the grim face of the fighter was once more his mask against the world.

"I'm wondering at myself for being surprised," he said. "I had to come a good many hundred miles to learn from your own lips something I should always have known." His eyes fell coldly on the girl. "What a rotten game!"

Pogue gripped his shoulder.

"You get out of here—get out or——"

"Or what?" With savage violence North flung Pogue's hand aside. Goaded beyond endurance, North's self-command had snapped and his eyes flared up with the sudden fire of a cornered wild thing.

# CHAPTER NINE

UNNOTICED the hushed room had darkened. Beyond the window snow clouds were piling high up in the sky, shutting off the sun, rendering shadowy and unreal the four watchful forms within that narrow room.

"Well, why don't you throw me out? What are you waiting for—your bodyguard?" The open contempt in North's voice brought a dull flush to Pogue's cheeks.

Ready for conflict, North waited, burning for physical encounter, for anything that might silence the surging agony within him. But neither Pogue nor the sheriff moved, and very slowly from North's eyes the hope of battle died. Walking with heavy step across the room, he picked up his knapsack.

Pogue nodded. "That's the wisest thing for you—get going."

"Why?" In hot revolt the girl confronted him, and as Pogue made no answer she stepped to North's side. "What right have they to send you away? What have you done?"

At the rustle of her presence, North turned. Her eyes beneath the heavy lashes brought back a flood of memories, and he felt the touch of her hand on his sleeve.

"I'm not sending you away, Corrin," the soft voice was saying. "Have these others any right to send you?" In that old remembered gesture she raised one small hand to her throat, and for the last time North spoke.

"No one is sending me away. I'm going because I don't ever want to see any of you again—and you, Cass, least of all. I don't even want to remember a girl I thought existed—but didn't." Grimly he looked back at the two men. "I came to you broke and hungry out here in this Western country where you boast about giving every man a chance and a square deal. And now Wolfshead doesn't want me." Hand on the door he looked back for the last time. "I'm leaving you and your damned town. I hope to God I never see it again."

Behind him the door slammed. That was over. Finished. And with it North realized that a part of his life had come to a close, a part of him that had dreamed dreams and held a world of hope. All ended. With unseeing eyes he stood gazing at the cloud-crowned Rockies until a whine and the touch of a soft nose against his hand told him that Bounce was waiting, and

pierced with an overwhelming sense of loss, North knelt down and pulled the dog to him.

"We're off again, Bounce, old boy," he whispered. "They don't want us here." Without a look behind he threw the torn knapsack over his shoulder and turned drearily down the road.

Far ahead, beyond the heavily banking clouds, the towering crests of the Rockies brooded, and North's eyes rose to the snow-capped pass. He could make the goldfields by night.

Ten minutes walking brought him to the frozen bank of Wind River, and crossing on the long log bridge he climbed steadily for two hours. It grew colder, and those high-massed clouds kept moving down, closing in upon the upper peaks until they were lost in whirling mists. By midafternoon North gained the first range of foothills, and resting, turned to look back.

Like a toy world the lower plains lay spread out before him. Far to the west the sun threw back the glittering whiteness of frozen snowfields, but closer in, where Wolfshead lay, all was shadow. Smoke curled upward from a score of chimneys, and a pang of uncontrollable loneliness seized him. Once more he was turning his back on the homes of men, on the warmth of human firesides and—on love.

Love! As if the very word were repellant he sprang to his feet and hurried up the steep trail until he had lost the last view of the plains.

Still upward. Against his heated face North felt the gathering cold. A wind, damp and penetrating, was springing up from out the west, and more than once Bounce stopped uneasily to sniff the air. Swiftly the purple shadows that lay athwart the gulches deepened, and an hour later the soft, stinging touch of a snowflake fluttered upon North's upraised face. Looking up, he saw that only the nearer cliffs were visible—silently on every side successive veils of misty whiteness were being lowered between him and the outside world.

The trail grew steeper, winding upward now between tall granite walls, their jagged outlines softened by the snowflakes that came piling higher and thicker from the distant pass.

On he went, stopping no more. Once the trail emerged upon a broad, park-like upland, and here, unhindered by trees or rocky walls, the storm burst full upon him. Howling through the pines whirling about his ears, the wind swooped down from out the pass, obliterating even the nearby rocks in a sudden

tempest of fine, dry snow, forcing North to bow his head and pull the visor of his cap low over his eyes. That was better. But his feet kept slipping and twice he missed the trail. A million swirling flakes choked and blinded him, and he pulled the collar of his mackinaw across his mouth. Behind him, face close to earth, Bounce trudged, shaking the snow from his long, shaggy coat, stopping often to gnaw the ice particles from between his toes.

Like a jeering antagonist the storm howled about him, as if nature too were adding her own insensate hostility to an already unfriendly world. Yet that very sense of hostility and battle aroused him, and doggedly the man fought on.

But the short afternoon was swiftly darkening, and between infrequent lulls in the storm North could see the blueness of twilight deepen. The trail had re-entered the timber, bringing welcome relief from that biting wind, but here too the snowflakes came fluttering thickly down, piling silently but steadily about the tree trunks, hiding the trail, filling North's lungs with their feathery, choking softness. Already he was wet with sweat, and once, pulling off his cap, he pushed back his thick, matted hair and wiped the melting snow from his forehead. Another lull. There was something leisurely, something fiendishly certain about that cold, impersonal enmity of the storm. With gathering anxiety he hurried on.

Again he lost the trail, and only his dog's frantic barking brought him back to its winding dimness. Darker now. The blurred, half obscured outlines of the trees had become less real. Twice he stumbled to his knees, but each time rose and faced the storm again. Slow going, he had almost to feel his way. At the top of each rise North stopped to peer about him, but there was only the low humming of the wind in the trees and the cold touch of snow on his face. Still upward but even slower now, and at the first sheltered turn he sat down, leaning his back against a tree. He was so curiously weak against the soft white yielding stuff that even in its yieldingness grasped at his feet with unseen hands, buffeting, blinding, holding him back. An infinite desire for rest crept over him, an overpowering drowsiness, promising tranquility and peace. His head nodded forward, and catching himself up with a jerk, he staggered to his feet. Mustn't sit down. That way meant the long slumber of winter death.

On he went, plunging knee deep through the snow, brushing against unseen tree trunks, stumbling into drifts that lay ever higher in his path. It was becoming an unreal dream. In the darkness North groped about, feeling with his feet for the trail, but there was no trail. Slowly he circled, found himself in a dense tangle of aspen that covered him with snow, and wholly bewildered, staggered back at last over his own footprints. Dog-tired and defeated, he leaned against a tree. He had lost the trail.

Close beside him, as if sensing danger, the dog crouched, his wet, cold muzzle against his master's hand. Heavily North raised his head. Should he go down again? Should he follow his own tracks out of the foothills and back to Wolfshead?

To Hell with Wolfshead! That dogged look returned. To Hell with them all down there. He was done with Wolfshead. Better to keep going. Better still to rest. After all, it was too dark to keep going. With a kind of dull surprise North realized he was half seated, half lying against a wind-thrown tree. Well, better than standing. And the snow—how soft it was. No longer cold, but soft, as a pillow is soft. A place to sleep—perhaps later—after he had rested. But now the only thing was rest.

Minutes passed. His outstretched body was whitening, losing outline, becoming part of that twilight, frozen world. He ought not lie there. He ought to be moving—and yet——Something was tugging at him, bringing him back to consciousness, and he felt Bounce pulling excitedly at the collar of his mackinaw. Wiping the snow from his eyes, North sat upright and with a low whine the dog turned his shaggy head toward the left. North listened.

A brief lull in the storm brought the confused sound of voices to his ears, and through the darkness he followed the direction of the dog's gaze. Again from somewhere across the swirling snow came voices, far away. North called, but the wind flung back his words. He shielded his tired eyes, then started—a light, dim and distant, was shining through the forest.

Painfully against protesting muscles North staggered to his feet and plodded forward with short, uneven steps. Once more he thought he heard the sound of voices, fainter down the mountainside, but the light ahead was stronger, and with newborn hope he struggled on. Almost at once he emerged upon a

little clearing enclosed by a fence of rough birch poles, and beyond this a low, one-storied structure, its two windows gleaming brightly. Pushing his way through the gate, North rapped on the door. No sound. Again he pounded with his mittened fist. Only the wind high up among the trees, the white, unflickering lights of those silent windows.

There was something spectral about that lonely, empty cabin with its brightly gleaming windows telling of recent occupancy. Loudly North turned the knob. The door was locked. Thrusting his shoulder against it, he pushed with all his failing strength. It creaked but resisted.

Stepping back a pace, North crouched, and with a last desperate effort of his storm-wracked body, leaped full at the door. Beneath that impact the lock shattered, the door swung inward, and North staggered into the room. With a gasp of horror he stopped.

There at his feet lay the prostrate body of a man, his head encircled in a widening pool of blood.

## CHAPTER TEN

For the space of a heartbeat North gazed at that figure stretched face downward on the floor.

No least motion, no sign of life, and the head lay so curiously flat on the rough boards. Dropping to his knees, North raised the man's body in his arms, and gently turned him. Slowly the head fell back, and with startled eyes North found himself looking down into the still white face of Mills.

But at that sight all feeling of weariness vanished, and hurriedly he tore open the heavy shirt, then laying his ear close to the ranger's chest, heard, faint but unmistakable, the slow beating of his heart. With the knowledge that Mills still lived, new strength flowed in upon North, and lifting the slight figure, he carried him to a cot covered with army blankets.

Blood still oozed from a jagged gash where the skin had been torn, as if by some heavy weapon, and ripping up a piece of toweling, North fashioned a rough bandage, then covering the unconscious man with a blanket, looked about him.

A large, bare room. A small open desk, a typewriter, and two cabinets of file cases on one side, the black iron cot on the other,

and between them a large heating stove and two chairs. From a table near the wall a lamp cast its white illumination, causing heavy shadows to crowd a low doorway opening on a room beyond, and picking up a flashlight, North walked to the entrance.

A small bedroom, a kitchen and a locked door leading to a woodshed—nothing more. Retracing his steps, North hurried out to the porch, and throwing the circle of light about him, carefully examined the snow, but the wind had wiped away all signs of foot-steps—even his own. Only near the door lay a few patches of flattened snow that might have fallen from the shoes of Mills' assailants. He listened, but except for the low, uneasy whining of the dog and the howling of wind in the pine trees, there was neither sound nor movement in all that snow-filled world.

This, then, was Mills' ranger station. Closing the door, North stood in the center of the room, his eyes moving restlessly about. Scale books and survey notes were stacked against the opposite wall, and some, as if thrown hastily aside, lay on the floor near the filing case. The place bore the marks of hasty search. In a far corner North saw Mills' knapsack still unpacked, and again his eyes roamed the room—the ranger could not have reached there before noon. Strange that—from beneath the cot something black caught North's eye, and stooping, he picked up a .38 automatic. Deliberately he sniffed the barrel, then opened the magazine to be sure that no shots had been fired, and taking off his heavy mackinaw, leaned over the unconscious ranger.

Mills' breathing was heavier now, a little more regular. The bleeding, too, had stopped, but there was no trace of returning consciousness, and heaping fresh wood upon the stove, North took up his long vigil beside the cot of this man who had been his friend.

Hours passed. Immobile as an Indian he sat with brooding eyes fixed on the pale feverish face until a feeling of helplessness drove him to pace back and forth across the room. If only he could do something! There must be something he should do to help this stricken man, yet he could only sit and wait. Twice he tried the phone, but the blizzard had cut off all connection with the outside world, and nothing but a faint buzzing came over the deadened line.

So through that night of wind and snow the storm raged

down from out the pass, while one by one the leaden hours dragged by. An intolerable night. Momently North watched life ebb lower in that unconscious figure, unable to help him, unable to secure aid. Toward morning the room grew chill, and he heaped high the fire. Once, somewhere down the slope, a tree, falling before the wind's onslaught, crashed dully to the ground. Worn out at last, North must have dozed, for his eyes opened to a gray, misty light filtering through the window, and stiff and weary, he rose to look out on the dawn of a new day. It was still snowing, but not so wildly now. The wind had fallen and drifts lay piled waist high across the porch, while between the tall black tree-trunks long aisles of undulating whiteness stretched endlessly back into the dimness of the forest.

A low groan brought North to the ranger's side, and leaning anxiously down, he touched his fingertips to Mills' forehead—it was hot, and the cheeks were flushed with fever. Slowly he opened his eyes, and looking vacantly into North's face, seemed to smile, but soon the eyes fluttered and closed. Once more North tried the telephone, without success, then resumed his restless pacing. Again Mills groaned and raised a weak hand to his temple.

Abruptly, as if reaching a decision, North took from the wall a pair of snowshoe racers and drew on his mackinaw. Bounce was already at the door, looking expectantly up, but North shook his head, and pointed to the still figure on the cot.

"Stay here, boy. I don't know what good you can do, but I'd rather you stayed here." He spoke quietly, as one might speak to a human being, and in quick comprehension the dog's air of expectancy vanished. Obediently, but with visible reluctance, he walked to Mills' cot and lay down at its foot as if on guard.

North nodded. "That's a good chap." He filled the stove, turned down the draft so that it would burn slowly, and with a last look at the ranger, went out into the waning storm.

Shielding his eyes, he looked about him through the gathering light. Far down the slope to the eastward a pine tree bore the Forest Service trail blaze, the long yellow scars standing out clear and distinct against the dark trunk, and fastening on his snowshoes North hurried toward it. Another blaze and still another lay beyond, and confident now that they led out to the foothills, he followed the winding trail.

Even down hill it was hard going. In spite of snowshoes he sank through the powdery, unpacked snow, and before half an hour passed he had thrown back his mackinaw and stopped to wipe the perspiration from his face. Once a flurry of wind and snow closed in about him, wiping out the blazes of the trail, but he picked them up lower down. He was making better time now, in spite of drifts, until at the end of an hour he had reached the lower line of timber and stood looking out across the last slope of the foothills down to where the cabins of Wolfshead lay, a cluster of dark patches against the snow.

Beyond the protection of the trees, the crust had hardened, and with increasing speed North followed the trail to the foot of the slope. Here it led into a broken sled road, and unfastening his snowshoes, he left the foothills behind him and struck out across the level upland. Reaching the deserted streets of the little town at last, he passed the commissary, turned into the familiar wooden building, and climbed the stairs.

On the top floor a narrow passageway bore Doctor Mirov's name, and without knocking North entered, then instinctively his tall figure stiffened—Catherine Mirov stood watching him from across the room. Neither spoke while her gaze passed coolly over him, and at last she shrugged.

"So you never really intended to go, did you, man of many threats and promises? I wonder, Corrin, if you ever keep either."

His eyes tightened, but with an effort he held himself in check, and his voice was even colder than her own.

"Where is your father?"

"What do you want with him?"

"Where's Doctor Mirov?"

Again their eyes clashed, and again he seemed to struggle with himself for calmness, but the door to an inner office opened and Doctor Mirov stood looking out at them. Recognizing North, he smiled—behind that smile at least there was no mistaking the kindly intent.

"So soon you are back? But they told me you had gone to the goldfields."

"I missed my way in the storm and ended up at the ranger station. I found Mills unconscious on the floor and came down to get help."

"Mills unconscious!"

"Hurt badly." Rapidly, still ignoring the presence of the

girl, North told of finding the ranger and of how he had tried to care for him through the night.

"He's been unconscious for hours, and by dawn his head began to pain. It's not safe to leave him alone, but I had to get help and the phone's out."

Already the old doctor had picked up a well worn bag, and drawing on a heavy corduroy coat, pulled a cap about his ears.

"Will I need snowshoes?"

"It's so soft they won't help you much, and I've broken trail all the way down."

Doctor Mirov nodded, then to his daughter, "Come with us, Cass. We'll need you."

In another moment the three were hurrying down the rickety stairs and out into the cold morning. To the east the clouds were lifting, and a rising sun revealed mile after mile of glittering, dazzling white, while high against the horizon on either side of Starlight Pass the granite ramparts of the Rockies had turned the newly fallen snow to a billion gleaming facets of reflected light.

Steadily North walked before them, breaking trail, while heads bowed and in silence the others followed, trudging upward across the first range of foothills, stopping rarely for breath, bending themselves to their task.

But as they entered the forest, Cass brushed by North and took the lead. The snow was more level here, more like powder, and for a time he walked close behind her, watching the girl's long, easy stride, wondering at the sureness of her footing on the slippery trail. Clear before them lay the tracks of North's descent, and by early afternoon they stood at last upon a little knoll, looking down into the wooded amphitheater where the ranger station stood. Smoke was still rising from the chimney, and with a feeling of vast relief North ran down the slope and threw open the door. Mills lay motionless on the cot, and in mute report of his own guardianship Bounce looked up to his master.

But North's anxious eyes were on the doctor as with quick, practiced fingers the old man unwound the bandages and peered down at the jagged wound. Audibly he sighed, listened intently to the man's breathing, then one hand slipped to his pulse. At last he nodded.

"He has suffered a serious wound. It may be concussion."

Frowning, Doctor Mirov reached for the satchel, and with his daughter's help, began cutting away the thick hair. Once he looked up.

"Have you eaten today?" and as North shook his head in negation, the physician smiled.

"Do you not ever eat? Do you only fight and climb mountains—always without food? Why is it we give no care to our bodies until they no longer serve us?"

The words were lightly spoken, but concern lay within the old man's eyes.

"See what you can get together, Cass, while Mr. North helps me undress Mills."

But it was not until late afternoon that the ranger showed any response to the doctor's patient efforts, and then it was only to open his eyes and weakly ask for water. The fever had not mounted, but with foreboding the doctor looked out at the gathering night, and reluctant to go, he rose and turned to North.

"Not yet has this man reached the crisis, but meanwhile I can do no more. From now on life or death depends on how quiet he is kept and whether or not that wound has affected the brain itself. I wish I might stay here, but I cannot. There are two in Wolfshead who need me even more than Mills." The doctor's eyes rose to his daughter, and in understanding she nodded.

"I'll stay with him, Dad?"

"It is better so. You will know what to do, and with two of you to relieve one another I shall be leaving this old, dear friend in good hands." The kindly eyes, weary with many years, looked down into that quiet face, and in a gesture tender as a woman's one hand reached forward and stroked the white cheek, then he turned away, and kissing Cass, went out into the falling dusk.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUICKLY the soft crunching of the snow died away. It had become suddenly silent within that darkening cabin where these two turned at last to meet each other's eyes.

North lighting a lamp said, "Your father has courage to leave you with a man who keeps neither threats nor promises."

She ignored the thrust. "I'm sorry I said what I did. I misjudged the reason for your coming back to Wolfshead."

"I wonder," his voice was hard and remote, "I wonder why it is ever necessary to judge what another does."

"And yet you——"

"I know." He looked down at the ranger's pallid face. "Well, here's one at least who didn't judge," North added softly. "He took me in, helped me when the whole snarling pack was against me, and now he lies there, dying maybe, and I can't help him. So I don't greatly care, Cass, what your judgments are, either one way or the other."

She winced at the coldness of his tone. "No, you are one of those who are sufficient to themselves—you need no one."

"Is that what you thought that night?"

"It is what I've always thought."

He turned away. "What difference does it make?" The voice was infinitely weary, with a weariness that came from the spirit as well as from the body, and his eyes beneath the lamp-light looked heavy and haggard.

Remembering his long vigil, Cass pointed toward the inner door.

"You were up all night with Harry and you need rest. Sleep, while I sit here with him. If anything happens I'll wake you."

He shook his head. "I'm not tired."

But resolutely she took his arm and led him toward the door. "Come. I don't want two sick men on my hands."

Cass closed the door quietly after him, then walked back to the stove, where Bounce lay. For a time she stood looking back at the silent room, then suddenly stooping, buried her face in the shaggy softness of the dog.

And in spite of North's resolve to keep wakeful, he fell asleep almost as soon as he had stretched out on the cot, so that it was not until nearly midnight he awoke to hear the girl's frightened voice, and stumbling to the door, saw her struggling with Mills in the center of the floor. The ranger's face was burning, his eyes vacantly bright, and in spite of the girl's desperate efforts he was making for the outside door just as Corrin reached them.

As one might lift a child, North carried the ranger back to bed and pulled the blankets about him. For a moment he struggled, crying out weakly in delirium, then his body relaxed

and again he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The girl's eyes were wet. "He's dying, and there's nothing we can do. Nothing." Her hands clung to North's shoulder, as if seeking strength, and touched by the sorrow on her face, his eyes softened. He stooped over Mills.

"I think he's breathing more easily now," he said. "You better catch a little sleep yourself."

She shook her head. But he could see that she was trembling, and instead of urging her, North raised the girl's body in his arms, and walking to the inner room, laid her on the cot. Returning, he sat down beside Mills.

In watchful, anxious silence broken only by the deep breathing of the ranger, the hours passed. On the floor, as a grim reminder, that ghastly stain still lay, and going to the kitchen, North returned with a brush and pail of water. And it was on his hands and knees that Cass found him a little after dawn. He looked up unsmiling from his task.

"I thought this might be a good job for a bum," and he resumed his scrubbing.

She turned back without reply, and soon the fragrance of coffee crept in to him. At length she called. He ate alone in the kitchen to keep from waking Mills, but when he returned the girl was seated at the foot of the ranger's cot, and to North's delight he saw that all signs of delirium had passed. Happily Cass pointed to an empty bowl.

"He drank a little broth," she whispered.

The tension had lifted, and with it some of the bitterness between them, so they talked in low tones, and once as Corrin lit a cigarette, Mills opened his eyes and very feebly whispered, "Smells plum' enjoyable, that smoke," then fell asleep again. By morning the ranger was fully conscious, and after breakfast North put on snowshoes and followed the telephone line down to where the wire had been broken by a falling tree. He spliced the ends together, and returning to the cabin, found that he was able to call Wolfshead and tell Doctor Mirov the news of Mills' improvement.

"You bring me welcome word," the voice, with its slight foreign flavor, came over the phone. "I am relieved. Supervisor Guthrie already rides to the station with supplies and food for our sick man. With him there will be no need of my daughter. Tell her please to come down."

North hung up the receiver. The girl sat reading by Mills' bedside, and for a time Corrin's dark eyes watched her, watched her hair glinting in the reflected light that touched to ivory whiteness the soft curve of her neck. And as he watched her it seemed as if in that silent room all of the light had come together, concentrated, suffusing its entire radiance upon this girl who sat there reading with eyes that were deeper than blue. Memories crowded close about him until the little cabin was filled with ghosts of their yesterdays. For hers was a face that had kept North silent company through many days and nights, and every feature was indelibly fixed upon the man's heart. Pogue's affianced! For an instant red anger surged within him, and with a feeling akin to fear he realized that they were there alone in that snowbound cabin up on the roof of the world. The very intentness of his gaze may have carried its own telepathic signal, for she looked up, and startled, half rose.

"Corrin, you look so——" She stopped. She had spoken his name, and the sound of it lingered like some audible memory.

"I was thinking," he said slowly, "I was thinking that six short months ago my maddest dreams wouldn't have dared to picture that you and I should share this," he laughed in bitterness, "this delightfully domestic scene."

With an effort he turned away. "Your father wants you to come down." His voice had again become cold and impersonal.

"And you?"

North pointed to the figure on the cot. "I'm staying with Mills until he's better."

"That may be a long time."

"My time is his—as much as he needs of it. He's the one person here who mistook me for a human being."

Sorrow clouded her eyes, and her lips parted to speak, but seeing the grim line of his mouth, she began putting on her heavy wraps. At the threshold she stopped.

"I'll send up more bandages by one of the loggers."

But before she could open the door, North took a long step toward her, and his hands fell heavily to her shoulders.

"One thing before you go, Cass. I want to hear it from your own lips. Is it true, the thing Pogue said?"

"That I am engaged to him? Yes."

His hands tightened, and in spite of herself she winced.

"I'm wondering at myself for letting you go," the low voice was saying. "Even now something inside me tells me that I'm a fool to let you go."

"Can you stop me, Corrin—now?"

"Why not? Who else is to decide whether or not I let you go down to him? And yet——" The big hands fell to his side. "I let you go. Yes, you play a queer game—but you'd better go now."

"Corrin, I couldn't——"

Savagely he turned, and something in his eyes made her flinch from him.

He flung open the door. "Better go, Cass—while there's time."

A second later the door closed. For a while he walked restlessly about the room, then picked up the book she had been reading, and in less than an hour Mills awoke.

North hurried to the bedside. "Feeling better?"

The ranger nodded, and sensing that he wanted to speak, North leaned closer.

"Have my cayuses been fed?"

"Fed and watered both. They wanted to be remembered to you. Any pain?"

"A little over the eyes."

"What happened?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

"Don't you remember anything of that night?"

Mills closed his eyes, and at first North thought he had again sunk into unconsciousness, but soon the lips were moving.

"I remember a knock on the door. I went out on the porch. It was dark and no one was in sight. I think I called, and when I turned to go back, something hit me. I seem to remember a man, maybe a couple men. I can't be sure. What happened then?"

North shook his head. "From the look of things they ransacked your files, for when I got here papers and survey notes were scattered over the floor. You were lying near the cot with your gun out, and the door was closed. I had to break it in. There were no tracks left in the snow. Have you any idea who the men were?"

Very slowly Mills nodded. "Yes, I got an idea, all right."

"Who was it?"

A bark from Bounce interrupted. A loud knock sounded, and Guthrie threw open the door. Pulling off his cap, he flung the heavy mackinaw into a corner of the room and leaned down over the ranger.

"How goes it, Harry, old boy?" The voice, usually so firm, now held a tone of deep anxiety.

"Fine. I'll be out working by tomorrow."

"Like Hell you will. You're going to take it easy." Affectionately he patted the ranger's shoulder, then turned to North. "I'm staying here all night. Is there room for my saddle horse in the barn?"

"Two empty stalls."

"Good. See you in a minute." The supervisor went out into the snow, returning with two full panniers. "You're going to live high, Harry." He held up the parcel. "Chicken. Helen cooked it for you—we'll thaw the old bird out."

And cheered perhaps by Guthrie's presence, or perhaps because his own rugged constitution had begun to assert itself, Mills smoked his first cigarette after supper, and propped among deep pillows, told Guthrie of that attack in the darkness.

Through it all the supervisor sat without comment, eyes fixed frowning on his riding boots, but at the end he rose and walked the length of the cabin. "I wonder," he said, as if to himself, and once again, "By God, I wonder."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Mills looked up. "Wonder what, Boss?"

"Do you suppose they were looking for those timber trespass notes?"

"What good would it do to steal them?"

"Well, for one thing, it would put off the case until next year. We'd have to go in and make that survey again." Guthrie turned toward North. "Were the files disturbed when you got here?"

"Most of them were pulled out, the desk had been broken into, and that pile of survey books was thrown in a heap against the wall."

Guthrie nodded. "I'll bet eleven dollars that was it." And by way of explanation to North he added, "Last summer the com-

pany tried to get by with some illegal timber cutting on National Forest land. Besides that they fenced in a pasture that belonged to us for their own livestock. I made a survey of the area to use as evidence when the case came up, and Pogue has been fighting every move. We've got a clear trespass against them, and it might hurt his plans if we won a victory over them now. That may be why they wanted to get those notes."

"You mean they didn't get them?" North asked.

"You bet they didn't. Those notes are——" Guthrie pulled himself up and added slowly, "elsewhere." His eyes turned to Mills. "If they're going to use that kind of tactics, Harry, we may be in for the toughest and dirtiest fight we've ever had."

The two foresters fell silent, and a little later North filled the stove with fresh wood and leaving the others, went to bed.

They were up early the following morning, and while Corrin cooked breakfast, Guthrie saddled his horse. The meal was a silent one, but as North began heating a pail of snow water the supervisor followed him into the kitchen.

"North," his voice lowered, "I don't need to say how much I owe to you for saving Mills' life. Without you he'd never have pulled through the night."

"Let's not talk about that—I owe Mills something, you know. What were you going to say?"

"Just this. We can't move Harry down to the hospital, and I've got to get back into Wolfshead by noon. Can you take charge here until Mills is better?"

"My time's not valuable."

Guthrie smiled, realizing the younger man's wish to avoid any further thanks. "That will help a lot." He hesitated. "One thing more. I've heard how Pogue and his trusty sheriff drove you out of Wolfshead. It was a rotten deal, like all of Pogue's deals, and I wish I could help you. If it was possible I'd offer you a job with the Service, but there's no chance at this time of year." He rose and held out his hand. "I just want you to know that whatever happens you've got at least one friend in Wolfshead," then smiling he added, "two friends, counting Helen."

North's eyes brightened at the unmistakable friendliness in the man's tone. "It's good to know that," he answered. "Up to now I didn't think I had a friend in all the Rockies."

"A man like you will never lack friends for long," the super-

visor's steel gray eyes were on him. "Take my advice, North. Don't let the ways of the world make you bitter. I've known plenty of its seamy side myself—I'm expecting to know more. Meanwhile, if I let my enemies bother me I'd be afraid to sleep alone by now." His easy, cheerful laughter rang out and returning to the other room he stooped low over Mills.

"I'm leaving you in good hands, old timer. Take things easy. The Forest Service can't stand to lose you." In another moment he was gone.

Through the window Mills' eyes followed the retreating figure until it was lost among the pines. "There's a man it would be a privilege to go to Hell for. When I first came into this Western country fifteen years ago, I was down and out, not a cent, and hungry, like——" He hesitated, and with a smile North completed the sentence.

"Like I was."

Mills nodded. "Like you. That was in the early days of the Service, and none of the land around here had been included in the National Forests. Anybody could come in and cut the timber or run sheep and raise Hell generally. Guthrie was a ranger over in the Gros Ventre—he'd only been out of forest school a couple of years, and he needed somebody to help him, so I tried the job. Well, it hasn't exactly made me wealthy, but it's given me a lot of memories I wouldn't trade for a million dollars, and it's taught me to respect that man more than anyone I know." He smiled in retrospect. "Guthrie didn't say much about the birds that knocked me out the other night, but I know what was on his mind."

Mills leaned forward. "Listen. I'm going to let you in on this —you'll learn it anyhow if you stay around here. There's a fight brewing between the Forest Service and Pogue's outfit—a finish fight." The low voice stopped, then began again. "It looks as if a showdown can't be far away. The North Continental people have had it in for us ever since we came into this country. They've always been the big boss here and they want to keep on being.

"They've already got the ranchers where they want 'em. They pay the settlers next to nothing for hauling logs and cutting ties, and if the company buys their timber Pogue puts any price he wants on it. Nobody has anything to say but Bert Pogue and his gang, so everything's lovely—for them. Besides that, for the

past five years they've been cutting government timber and using government range. Pretty soft for the North Continental. Then last fall the Forest Service steps in and makes this outfit pay for its timber, tellin' 'em Uncle Sam's kinda tired playing Santa Claus. So we put the land in a National Forest and started to clean up." Mills nodded toward a corner of the room. "See those scale sticks over there? With those little contrivances we rangers measure the amount of lumber in every log that's cut and we charge the company for it. All of which don't set very well with the North Continental. They want things their own way, just as they had it back in Montana and Idaho.

"What they're after now is to cripple our work so that they can go to their political friends and say they can't do business with us, and that the whole country'd be a damned sight better off without us.

"The company knows that the longer we're here, the stronger we're going to have the people behind us, and the sooner they strike, the better for them. Right now they're working through the political boys and spending plenty money in the right places. They've got the sheriff of Wolfshead in their pocket, and they've got a lot of good friends at Cheyenne. All they need now is to get something on us, to break down our work or fix it so we can't handle it—anything that'll give them a chance to make a holler."

Mills grinned in retrospect. "When Guthrie first came in, they tried to see how much his palm itched, and Pogue offers him a fat cut if he'll let the company take out some timber free for nothing. Old Guthrie looks down his moustache and considers a while, then he says with a kind of smirk, 'Well, I've heard everybody has his price.' Pogue is so tickled he can't see straight, and he's already reaching down in his pocket to pull out a roll big enough to choke an ox, when Guthrie adds, 'Trouble is, Mr. Pogue, I'm so God damned high priced you might just as well consider me honest.' Since then Pogue hasn't had too much love for the boss."

"It still looks to me as if that attack on you was personal revenge—not just to steal your survey notes," North objected. "Otherwise they could have broken into the cabin when you weren't here. Have you had trouble with any of the loggers?"

"Sure. Ever seen a district ranger who hadn't? Just about a week ago I found a couple of L'Abat's playmates cutting good

pine logs that weren't marked for cutting. They were pretty snooty about it, and as much as dared me to report it. When I did report it they got a call-down from headquarters and had to pay twice the regular price for the stuff. That didn't set well either, and it may be why I had that little friendly visit the other night. Either way it all fits in with their main idea of cleaning up on the rangers."

"How many rangers are there here?"

"Eight, counting me—we need about twice that many."

Wearily Mills closed his eyes. "And now my old bean isn't feeling too good after all this talk, so I'll be signing off."

That same afternoon North was returning from the barn behind the station when he saw fresh tracks in the snow, and with sudden uneasiness ran up the path and burst into the kitchen.

There, on the kitchen table, swinging a pair of long, slender legs, a girl looked with amused eyes up at him.

"Do you always come bustin' down on people in just that hostile fashion?" she asked.

"I didn't know who was here."

"Do you now?"

North smiled. "No one very dangerous."

"Oh, you're sure of that, are you?" The long legs went on swinging. She could not have been more than twenty—perhaps less. There was something almost childlike in the small mouth, round chin, and wide open eyes, but something of the woman too lay in the appraising scrutiny of the clear gray eyes. It was as if life for her might be a thing not wholly trustworthy.

"No, I'm not dangerous," she conceded. "I'm Nan Lakin—my granddad is Buffalo Lakin, one of Wind River's professional old timers." She nodded toward the room where Mills lay still asleep. "But tell me about Harry."

Briefly North gave her the barest outlines while she listened intently, her eyes on his face.

"I came over to help out," she said when he had finished.

"That's what I'm trying to do."

The girl was still watching him. "You know the tale they're telling about you in Wolfshead?"

"No."

"They say you knocked Harry Mills over the head yourself."

North barked an angry laugh. "I wonder what I did that for. So I could get the job of taking care of him? Who started that tale?"

"Pogue's outfit. Who else?"

North made no answer. Yes, such a tale, however thin, might fall in with Pogue's plans. It would make North even less welcome down in Wolfshead. His eyes turned again to the inner room and he saw that Mills had awakened.

"Hear the news?" North called.

"Yeah, I heard," the ranger grinned. "That story ain't goin' to get very far, but it might make 'em forget to look carefully in the proper quarters. What else did you hear, Nan?"

She turned to North. "One of the boys said that after you pulled out from town Cass Mirov landed on the sheriff and Pogue like only Cass can do when she's really mad. Told 'em that they were yellow, that they were afraid of you and that you had as much right there as they did."

"I can just see Cass taking him apart in her best style." Mills' eyes were speculative. "North, I'm inclined to believe that Pogue's beginning to regret he sent you away. For one thing, he'll hate people thinking that you made so big a difference with him."

Corrin raised his eyes. "In that case, it might be just as well not to let Pogue's crew know I'm up here."

"If that's meant for me," the girl answered, "I'm the original oyster. Nobody ever learned anything from me—not even myself."

And Mills summed up his own feelings, "Oh, to Hell with 'em."

But there was no smile on North's face. Instead, he grew more silent as the afternoon passed, and after dinner sat gazing with a fixed stare out the window until Mills looked curiously up at him.

"If it ain't being too inquisitive, is this just your natural bedside manner, or are you hatching up some plot?"

North walked the length of the room, then seated himself on the edge of the table. "As a matter of fact, it is a kind of plot." He glanced toward Nan Lakin, and reading his thought, Mills said, "Nan's one of us. I'd trust her with my marking ax." But the girl had already risen. "I've got to run along anyhow—I'll be back tomorrow with a pie that'll put you both flat

on your backs." And with a smile and a wave of the hand she left them.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Poor little kid." Mills looked after her. "But what about this here plot?"

"It started when you told me of the fight between you foresters and Pogue's company, but the main idea came when I heard Pogue was trying to hang this attack on me. I'm not vindictive, but if that fellow wants a fight, I don't see any reason to sidestep it. If he wants to paint me as a crook and worse, why shouldn't I let him do it? Why not fall in with his idea?"

A puzzled look had come over the ranger's face. "I don't know as I get you."

"Well, you said Pogue might be sorry he was in such a hurry to get rid of me. Now wouldn't it fit in still better with his plans to keep somebody around who hadn't much love for a forest ranger, especially if that forest ranger was you? In other words, if Pogue thought I had some reason for working against you, it might make me valuable to him—it might make me a useful tool."

Mills nodded slowly. "It might. You've got an idea there, old son." He pondered for a moment, then his eyes suddenly lighted. "North, maybe you're on the right track. Let's talk it over with Guthrie."

But Corrin held up a warning hand. "That's just what we can't do. Neither Guthrie nor anyone must know—only you and I." His face and voice were very earnest. "It's a dangerous game at best, Mills—you'll have to promise absolute secrecy."

In silence the ranger nodded assent, and so those two held council long into the night, and when at last North turned out the light the first plans of battle had been laid.

Mills gained strength rapidly. True to her word, Nan Lakin came not only the following day, but every day during the ranger's convalescence. At first North had wondered at Mills' great gentleness toward her—a gentleness that was half pity—but little by little he was able to piece together what Mills told him with the girl's own infrequent allusions to her life.

"She's bucked as tough a proposition as any kid ever has, and she ain't let it get her down," the ranger said once. "Nan was born out here, but she went East with her parents when she was five or six. Later her folks died, and she's seen some rough times—Nan don't talk about those years much. Then Nan's grandfather, old Buffalo Lakin, wrote for her to come out here and stay with him. He makes a kind of living on his ranch in the summer and hauls logs for Pogue in the winter. Buffalo don't cash in very high with the blue chips from any point of view, and living with him can't be much of a picnic."

Yet never once did North hear the girl complain. Not even after he knew her well. A curious combination of child and woman, frankness and reserve, simplicity and a kind of hard wisdom that could only have come from rubbing shoulders with a none too friendly world. They liked each other instinctively—perhaps her distrust of Pogue aided their friendship, perhaps the fact that each of them shared an unspoken loneliness—and between the two a sincere friendship ripened with the passing days.

Meanwhile Mills had managed to get about again, and in less than two weeks was out ploughing through the snow among the skidways of freshly cut logs, measuring their size and value with his scale stick, recording the number of railroad ties and sawlogs that were being taken out of the forest. Twice a month he took his scale book down to the commissary for comparison with the company's figures, and it was there he met Corrin toward the end of a cold winter day.

North looked more unkempt than usual. His face was unshaven, and as he entered the commissary men eyed him curiously, remembering that he had left Wolfshead with a warning not to return. But apparently undisturbed, North loosened his mackinaw and sauntered up to the ranger. The door to Pogue's office was open, and the rustling of paper inside told him that Pogue himself was within easy earshot.

"I hear the Forest Service won't let me build a cabin up Sheridan Creek without a permit," he announced truculently.

Mills looked up. "I guess that's right. What do you want to build a cabin for?"

"I can't get work, so I'm figuring on homesteading a piece of land."

"You'd starve to death trying to make a living up there.

Besides, it's not open to homesteading."

"You mean I can't take up any land inside the National Forest."

"Not inside this one. Listen, North, I've seen 'em try to pull a living out of that country for years, and you simply can't do it. It's too high up and the summers are too short to raise anything—even alfalfa. You did me a good turn a while back——"

"I didn't come to talk about that," North cut in with quick impatience. "I want to start a ranch."

"Sorry. You can't do it here. This country will grow one thing, and that's timber—we've closed it to ranching. Besides, the regulations——"

"To Hell with your regulations," North's voice rasped. "It's a wonder you forest rangers wouldn't cut some of the red tape so that a man can earn a decent living. Regulations—that's all I hear. Pretty soon we'll need a special permit to cook our own breakfast." He turned to the listening, grinning crowd. "These forest rangers will make a wilderness out of this country if they don't find easier ways of letting a man alone."

Behind him the rustling in Pogue's office ceased, and a chair scraped softly over the floor, as if the occupant had leaned forward.

Mills smiled patiently. "You don't seem exactly enthusiastic over Uncle Sam's methods, buddy."

"Why should I be? Why should anybody be enthusiastic who's ever worked in the woods? Every time I go on a National Forest I can't feel like a free man. There's always a ranger telling you where to cut and where not to cut, and another snooping around to see if your stumps are an inch too high or whether your brush is packed away in neat little piles. That's why I left the Southwest. It got to be so that there was a ranger behind every tree. It'll be that way here pretty soon."

Mills stepped down from his seat on the counter and pulled the flaps of his cap about his ears.

"I sure hope you're right about that last. We could stand a few more rangers up in this neck of the woods. Here's one little old bureaucrat who could get along fine with one or two more assistants. But that permit's out." And picking up his scale stick, he left the commissary.

As the door closed one of the loggers, a grizzled veteran of

the woods, laughed and slapped North heavily on the shoulder.

"That's the way to let him have it. Does me good to see somebody throw it into those government birds. Every one of 'em acts like he held a first mortgage on all God's country. Well, where will you be bound for now?"

"Wherever I can get work. Maybe over into Jackson's Hole."

A slight sound and North looked up. Pogue was standing in the doorway watching him.

"Thought you'd been invited to get out of Wolfshead?"

North faced him, unsmiling. "Between you and the Forest Service there doesn't seem to be much room here."

Again Pogue studied the tall man. "Come in here." He walked back into the office.

"So you're finding out at last that the Forest Service has this country bound hand and foot?"

"You just heard what I told Mills."

"Yes, I heard." For a time he sat plunged in thought. "North, I may have had a wrong idea about you. I don't know. But I like a man who will stand up on his hind legs and say what he thinks. I can use a man like that. Do you still want that job?" Pogue's smile had never been more friendly.

"Yes, if you've changed your mind."

"I'm not sure whether I have or not, but I don't want to do any man a wrong. I've got nothing against you—it may be we can be useful to one another. I'll see Jean L'Abat tonight and tell him to start you swamping out roads to the new skidways. You'll be working behind the surveyors, clearing out timber and brush where the new sled roads are to go—it's all ax work, the toughest job in the forest, don't forget that. You can batch at the Swede camp or you can build your own cabin—whatever you like. And remember this—if you don't come across, you're through. Jean will see to that." With a little nod Pogue reached for a pile of papers.

But when Pogue told L'Abat that night, he mystified his slow-minded woods boss by adding, "Jean, my boy, your little friend North may turn out to be quite an actor. Well, maybe I can be too. At any rate, let's keep him around here until I find out which of us knows his lines best."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pogue had been right in saying that swamping was the toughest job on the lumber operation, and perhaps because of that very fact North threw himself into the new work wholeheartedly, so that before the week was out every man in the logging camp admitted this newcomer could "hit the ball." He had to. No one realized more clearly than he how closely he was being watched—how every action was being weighed by Pogue and Jean L'Abat, and for that matter by every lumberjack in camp.

So from long before daylight until dusk North was out following the surveyor's lines, felling timber, laying long corduroy roads that wound through the forest down to where the ice of the river gleamed. Along these roads, heaped high with spruce logs and pine, the loggers' sleighs would come later, gathering up the winter's crop into huge skidways to await the coming of spring, the time of flood water when the ice would break and these same logs would begin their long journey down Wind River to the far-off mills. But now the river lay frozen and motionless, as if it too awaited the time when men would use its rushing snow-fed waters to carry the burden of the winter's cut from out the hills. Treacherous and undependable the river had always been, and each spring Jean L'Abat would shake his head. "One damn bad stream to drive," was his estimate, based on past experience.

But now the great cycle of the logging year was only beginning—the long fight of the woodsman against the hostile foes of winter. Man, the implacable plunderer, was again entering the forests, ax in hand.

Yes, they watched North. Skeptically at first, then with growing friendliness. For those same men who had seen him battling a losing fight with L'Abat had now to admit that he was no beginner at the difficult art of handling an ax. A true woodsman—but not one of them. From the first they realized he was set apart, this silent man with brooding eyes whose only close friend was the shaggy dog that kept always at his heels.

Bounce himself had been put on very strict probation by the logging camp dogs. As a newcomer he was sniffed at and

growled at, and not infrequently snapped at, but Bounce kept his own council and before long he was accepted into the canine fraternity, although he too held a little apart, like his master.

During that first week North built a small cabin of unpeeled pine logs, and with his wages purchased a stove and provisions. Twice L'Abat had come to his cabin for a talk and a smoke and sat through long silences regarding him with interested but wary eyes that spoke clearly enough of the woods boss' desire to learn more of this man. And each time after these visits Jean went down to the commissary, where he and Pogue held low-toned talks behind closed doors.

So it might have been as a result of all this that early the following week, just as North was beginning supper after a long day's work, a knock sounded on the door, and Pogue stood there. His teeth were shining in a cordial smile.

"Am I too late for supper?"

North shook his head. "No one's ever too late here. Take off your skis," and he dropped another thick cut of beef on top of the sizzling stove. Throughout the meal Pogue chatted volubly and easily, as if no shadow of unpleasantness had ever existed between them, and after dinner, cigar alight, leaning back comfortably against the wall, Pogue's talk turned in retrospect to the beginnings of the "North Continental." He told of their coming into that country, how the company had expanded until now its holdings embraced millions of acres throughout Oregon, Montana, and the northern Rockies. He told of the company's boats on the Atlantic and Pacific, carrying in their holds copper and lumber to the far-off ports of the world. With a frankness that surprised North, he described the long legal battles that had to be won before the corporation became master of the water power of many Western streams, and were able to harness their white, swirling swiftness to the needs of man.

It was an epic, a drama of the north woods, as Pogue told it that night in the light of the open stove, and his eyes glowed with the glamor of it, with satisfaction in the part that he had played in planning, dreaming, building, merging here with one company, fighting with another, waging one of those swift, merciless industrial battles, always forcing the weaker to sell out to the strong.

"That's it," he said once, "the strong. To the strong of the earth the earth's rewards are given. The tragedy is not to realize that until we're too old. I realized it long ago, and I set out to be one of the strong—to have the things I wanted and to hold them. That alone makes life worth while." His arm reached across the table, and impressively he tapped with his fingers on the back of North's hand.

"You too, can be one of the strong. You have it in you. You are a born leader of men, and there is great need for leadership in this work of ours." He stopped, his eyes fixed on the other's immobile face, and in silence the two sat smoking while North's eyes passed from the man before him to where in a corner of the room his dog lay quietly sleeping.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked at last.

"Shall I be frank—and blunt? It is because I can use you. Because we can be of use to one another—if you are wise. Out here, with the power I have behind me, I can make men, and I can break them. I waste no time on the weaklings of the world—but you are not a weakling. I don't know what happened in the past with you or—" an uncontrolled spasm of anger passed across his face, "—or with anyone else. It is the future I'm interested in. And now I am going to talk to you with absolute frankness for two reasons. First, I need you. And then—well, I've had Jean L'Abat size you up and I've heard what the men around the Swede camp say of you. They look up to you. They recognize in you the same quality that I recognize—leadership. You could have great influence here, North—and not only here in this lost corner of the Rockies, but throughout the state. The Wyoming operations of this company are in my charge—if everything goes well I hope to be general manager, and when that time comes it is not impossible you could step into my place here. Not even the surface values of this country have been scratched—whoever controls it controls a rich empire.

"Tonight I'm giving you a chance that may never come again. I am trusting you because it's the only way we can do business together, and because, if I happen to be mistaken in you, it won't take me long to know it. For never forget this—once I find out that you have double-crossed me, you'll leave this country—one way or another. If ever I go down, I'll take my enemies with me. That's part of my creed."

There was no mistaking the warning in the man's tone, or the absolute sincerity with which he spoke, and watching him, North could feel a growing tension in the little room, but he only nodded.

"Go on," he said.

"I'm out to smash the Forest Service. Not only here, but throughout the West. For five years now I've seen it grow in power. The rangers handicap our work and the work of every company that is trying to develop this country. The time has come when we've got to pick out the weakest link and tear it wide apart. Then with the help of our friends in Washington and Cheyenne we can destroy the entire system."

Pogue leaned forward. *"That weakest link is right here.* It's here between Starlight Pass and Wind River that we hold the whip hand—or can hold it, if we have the courage and the brains. For if we can break down their work and discredit them, I'll see that a howl is raised in the Cheyenne legislature that will be more than enough to force a Congressional investigation.

"After that it's easy. Every Western Congressman will be duty bound to support a movement that will split up the Forest Service and divide the National Forests among the states. Men close to the President are already for it. You know," Pogue flicked the ash from his cigar, "it's a lot easier to do business with the states than with the Federal Government—easier and more profitable. But I've been waiting to find somebody with brains and courage that I can trust, someone to start the ball rolling. The Forest Service isn't without friends, and we've got to show real reason—real inefficiency. We've got to show that they can't hold up their end. To do that I need a man without fear—someone my boys will follow without question. Above all things I need a leader with brains. That's where Jean falls down. Jean has the blind courage of a bull moose—he'd fight his way through a concrete wall, but he's just a little short on brains."

"And you think I have them?"

"That's the chance I take. I'm at least fifteen years older than you and I don't often make mistakes in men, but—" His eyes were looking intently into North's. "This time I wonder if I am mistaken. It's just possible you'll get foolish and talk. It's just possible you may try to double-cross me—" Again Pogue

smiled. "Two men did that once. Ask Jean to tell you what happened to them."

His eye drooped lower. "Don't try to put anything over on me, North. If you're not for me it would be much safer for you to clear out. I'm fighting for the biggest stake I've ever fought for—control of the forests, the mines and water-power over all this country, and I don't intend to let any one man or any group of men stand in my way. Is that perfectly clear?"

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

North watched him. There was a kind of deadly intentness about the man, a cold passion that told more plainly than any words of one who would stop at nothing to attain his ends. A man so seized by ambition that no thought existed but for his chosen goal. And watching him, North realized that Bert Pogue was of the stuff great leaders and great criminals are alike made—each according to his unpredictable destiny.

"Just what part do I play in all this?" North asked at last.

"A leading one. Help me gather together a few men—a few tested men that we can be sure of. Most of them can be found among the loggers here. Men like Buffalo Lakin who are so in debt to the company they've got to do what I say."

"And when I get them?"

Pogue's fist slammed the table. "Put the fear of God in the hearts of the forest rangers. Smash their morale. Make it so hard for them to run their damned forest that when a showdown comes we can prove they haven't been able to hold down their own jobs. I've tried to buy them out, and that doesn't work. Now let's try to scare them out—put everything in their way—turn everybody against them. Start on Mills and Guthrie. There isn't a ranger in the world who can stand up to what a few determined men could put them through this winter if you're the sort I think you are. I'll handle the newspapers and the political end—the Governor will believe what I tell him. Your job is to make it hot for the rangers here."

He stood up. "Well, is it a go?"

North too rose, and crushed his cigarette. "Sure," he answered diffidently, "I'll train your little band of cutthroats for you."

Then slowly those two smiled into each other's eyes.

But as Pogue went down the trail that night North stood in the doorway until he disappeared among the pines, and seeing Bounce watching him, he nodded into the darkness.

"Our friend Pogue," he confided, "is far from stupid, Bounce, old boy. I almost made the fatal blunder of underestimating him."

But the dog was listening to something outside, to a slight rustling that rose from beyond the cabin door, and darting out, North caught sight of a dark-clothed form stooping beneath the window. Quickly the figure cowered back into the darkness just as North's heavy hand closed over a trembling shoulder, and he looked down into the white, frightened face of Nan Lakin. The man's grasp released and in silence he led the terrified girl back into the cabin.

Beneath the light sweater he could see her breast rise and fall with fear, but in her eyes were anger and distrust.

"How long have you been there listening?" His voice sounded harsh and cold.

"Ever since I heard Pogue speak Buffalo Lakin's name." Vehemently she shook her head. "I didn't come here to listen. I came to see you, and when I heard voices I looked through the window and saw it was Bert Pogue. I'd have gone back but he said something about Buffalo Lakin being in debt to the company and I stayed."

"And what did you learn, Nan?"

"I learned you and Pogue are putting up a dirty job on the Forest Service—but you're not going to get Buffalo into it, even if he does owe money for tools and a grub stake." The girl was not far from tears. "He's not going to be a cat's paw to Bert Pogue while I'm here. You're just another one of——"

Very gently North laid his hand across the girl's mouth, and now he smiled down into her upturned eyes. "Don't judge too quickly, Nan. I wouldn't have you misjudge me for all the Bert Pogues in the Rockies. Instead you've got to believe in me more than ever, for I'm going to need your help. Remember everything you heard here tonight, but say nothing. That's all I can tell you now, except—trust me."

Hesitatingly she looked up at him, and for a long moment their gaze held each other's, then her own hands crept to his shoulder.

"I want to trust you, Corrin, you don't know how much. Only—I don't understand. You see I thought we were friends—good friends. I've never had many, and now—" The hand on his shoulder tightened. "You'll be square, won't you?"

His eyes looked full into hers. No guile lay there, no shadow of evasion. "I'll be square with you always, Nan."

Little by little a smile came, and he led her to the door. "Time for you to run along, young lady. I've got a few things that will bear thinking about."

And for long hours that night he sat with eyes that frowned into the dying fire.

That very week Pogue took North from his job of swamping and made him a foreman in the engineering section, where he would have more opportunity to mingle freely with the men. Here his chief duty was to see that the skidways were well placed and to help the loggers lay out routes for their sled roads. For the first time he had now a chance to form some estimate of the rank and file that went to make up Pogue's army of woodsmen and with something akin to admiration North began to understand how carefully Pogue was choosing his men from among the wildest and most discontented elements that drifted into Wolfshead. Wobblies from the inland empire, breeds from the reservations, drifters, men against the world, men who wanted to forget, who came to town seldom and stayed only long enough to transact their business. Misfits. Twisted types of men whom life had bruised and embittered. Sooner or later all these found their way into the woods camps as Pogue's potential tools.

But as North came to know them better, by slow degrees they lost their distrust of him, for here was one who could handle ax and saw with the best of them, who could shoulder a heavy pack and climb the steepest trail—a man without fear. And as the days passed they came tacitly to accept his leadership so far as such men ever accepted any human authority.

The loggers were not alone in showing increasing interest toward this man who came unheralded out of nowhere and who had so quietly taken his place among them. For as the days passed, Nan Lakin, infrequently at first and then with greater regularity, began taking the trail that led to North's cabin, bringing him fresh bread, cake, and sometimes milk from the lower ranches.

And it was on her return from such a visit that Helen Guthrie met the girl on the trail one late afternoon, and sensing where Nan had been, wagged a warning finger at her.

"Don't fall too hard for our big man of mystery, Nan," she admonished, then laughed outright as the other blushed and dropped her eyes. More seriously she added, "No one knows a great deal about him, dear."

The girl looked up. "No one knows a great deal about anyone—even about one's self. But I know this. He's lonely. Somewhere back in his life something happened to him. I think that's why he says bitter things at times and at times sits saying nothing, looking into the fire or playing with that dog of his."

Helen sighed. "I know. I wonder what it was—this thing that happened."

"I've never asked him. He probably wouldn't tell me. You don't know, do you?"

The older woman shook her head. "No. But it seems strange whenever he comes to Wolfshead he avoids anyone from the outside world. The last time he was down a party of tourists had just arrived from Albuquerque. He saw them from the outskirts of town, turned around, and went back into the hills again."

Silence fell while each was busy with her own thoughts.

"Corrin knew Cass once before, somewhere," Nan said at last. "One night he asked me about her. He listened with those eyes of his fixed on me until I felt—" Involuntarily she shuddered. "It was as if all his heart was in his eyes. I wouldn't care to be an enemy of Corrin North."

"I wonder if that's why Bert Pogue suddenly decided to be so friendly," Helen Guthrie reflected.

And more than once North had pondered that selfsame question. He realized that in spite of apparent frankness Pogue had not let him have his full confidence, that at least a portion of his plans was being carried forward without North's knowledge. Part of Pogue's reasoning North could guess, and its cold, unrelenting logic told him more clearly than words the type of man he was confronting. For by taking North into his confidence Pogue had gained the opportunity of watching him more carefully. If he proved disloyal, that would be reason enough for dealing out swift punishment, and if he carried out

Pogue's desires, he delivered himself into the man's hands. Either way Pogue would be well content.

But these possibilities were not greatly troubling North. They meant added danger and added need for caution, but they were giving him his chance to learn more about the company—to scrutinize their visible and invisible plans. And fortune aided him at the start. Within a month after North's arrival he prevented a strike among the haulers, persuading the men by sheer force of will to abandon their idea. Pogue heard of it, and though he said no word, heaped new responsibilities on North's shoulders.

"A good tool," Pogue told Jean, "and watch me use him."

North never seemed to tire. There was an enormous store of restless energy in the man, as if he actually welcomed this unremitting work to escape from his own thoughts. He needed little rest, and more than one logger returning before dawn from a late trip to Wolfshead saw a lamp still burning in the window of North's cabin, and a tall form pacing ceaselessly up and down the floor.

"One strange man, he," Jean L'Abat himself had said. "Like the cat he walk, but his heart it is of the timber-wolf. Alone, watchful, *et bien dangereux.*" And there were those who nodded in silent agreement.

Meanwhile North made more frequent trips down to the commissary, usually at night, when for long hours he and Pogue laid their plans and continued to recruit men for work in the upper camps. From these trips he would often return to his cabin just before dawn.

And it was toward the middle of one such night, when North had thrown himself on the bed to catch a few hours' sleep that a low growl from Bounce awakened him to the sound of footsteps crunching in the snow outside. Reaching above the shelf to where his automatic hung, North slipped quietly from beneath the covers, and in the darkness he felt the soft touch of fur as Bounce walked past him, still-legged and alert, to sniff the crack beneath the door. The fire had died, and the night outside lay black and still, then a low pounding of mittened hands sounded cautiously on the door, and North heard Mills calling.

Even without the note of anxiety in the ranger's voice, North knew something was amiss, for the two men had agreed to

keep apart and preserve an appearance of mutual hostility. Throwing open the door, North quickly drew the dim figure inside and lit the lamp.

"What's up?"

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MILLS was breathing deeply, and drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. Wearily he sank into a chair.

"Guthrie's disappeared."

"How long ago?"

Mills shook his head.

"Tell me all you know, Harry." North was already pulling on his pacs.

"He left my ranger station at noon to go right down to Wolfshead, and about eight o'clock Helen Guthrie phoned to ask where he was. I saddled up pronto and hit the trail to town, but he hadn't showed up there and nobody's seen him at the commissary. I got a searchlight and started back toward the ranger station, then I remembered he had said something about looking over those new skidways near the gorge to see if the loggers were piling them too high for us to scale. By that time it was close to midnight and I was feeling plenty uneasy, so I took the side trail down to the river—and pretty soon I make out what I'm reasonably certain were the tracks of Guthrie's horse. I followed them to the skidway, where the snow's been trampled down by men working, and there wasn't a Hell's chance of learning anything. I looked all over, then—" Mills' voice ceased as he reached in his pocket. "I found this under a log by the skidway." He laid the bronze badge of a U. S. Forester on the table. "That belongs to Jack Guthrie. His initials are inside. He's had it ever since I knew him. Something happened down there and I'm damned near afraid to think."

"No blood—no signs of a fight?"

"None."

"Did you look in the brush?"

"As well as I could with a small flashlight. I made a couple circles, but there were no tracks back among the timber."

"Was the ice in the river broken near the skidway?"

The words with their grizzly import died away before Mills answered, then very slowly he replied, "I thought of that. The

river narrows just where it enters the gorge, and the ice was solid to both banks."

North shook his head, puzzled. "It's all wrong," he said at last. "It doesn't fit the picture. Why would Pogue's outfit want to lay hands on Guthrie?"

"Why? Look at what they did to me. Besides, I can think of at least one good reason why they'd want to stop Guthrie tonight."

"Well, what reason?"

"Guthrie had with him the last of the survey notes and the evidence we'd been collecting against Pogue's gang in that timber trespass case."

"But how could they know Guthrie had it?"

"Those birds know whenever Jack Guthrie lights his pipe. Besides, he's made no secret about collecting the stuff and the trial comes up tomorrow. Everybody knows it. The lousy dogs!" Mills burst out in sudden anger. "Men don't do these things in cold blood—not even up here. Do I have to believe that Jack Guthrie's lying somewhere out in the forest because it's part of his job to buck a bunch of law-breaking crooks?"

Quietly North laid a hand on the other's shoulder. "Softly, Harry," he cautioned.

Mills threw himself into a chair, and still frowning, North drew on his mackinaw. Guthrie's abduction, if it was abduction, brought a new element of uncertainty into his own position. For if this were part of Pogue's campaign of intimidation, he had not entrusted North with even the slightest hint of it, and Corrin found himself wondering how much Pogue really knew. The whole thing might be a move to make North show his hand. A prey to doubt, he strapped the automatic beneath his coat, then led Mills out upon the dim trail that wound down through the pines toward the ice-locked banks of Wind River. Silently Bounce ran ahead, but as if he realized that this journey into the night had some special significance he kept very close to the two silent men.

At the skidway everything was as Mills had said. About the newly felled logs the white shafts of their searchlights gleamed on trampled snow but gave no hint of what might have happened there. Carefully North circled—no tracks led out into the forest except along the logging road itself. The dark, roughened ice of the river revealed nothing.

Dawn was graying to the east when North at last snapped off the searchlight, and together both men sat down upon a log.

"Only one thing occurs to me," North said at length. "Yesterday L'Abat came up to the Swede camp with four of the toughest loggers we have in the whole outfit. Later I saw them leave and go on down this trail. That may mean something or nothing. But the badge points to a struggle—the pin was bent as if it had been torn loose. Harry, I think you'd better quietly round up the rangers and work out all the trails. Whatever they've done to Guthrie, they're bound to leave tracks somewhere. I'm going back up the logging road to see if I can find anything. If L'Abat's gang had anything to conceal, this is the road they'd probably take."

Anxiety deepened on Mills' face. "We've got to find him quick. If Guthrie don't get down to Lander by tonight we're sunk on that trespass case."

"Then you'd better have a ranger waiting with a car at the foot of the trail ready to burn the road up." North rose. "Neither of us has any time to waste. If I need you I'll find you somehow. Got a gun?"

Mills nodded, and without further word North left him, followed close by his dog.

Dawn was tinting the snow a faint rose as North emerged upon a level upland bare of trees. Horse tracks lay thick about him here, as if several logging teams had passed, heavily laden, but among them he could make out the imprint of one horse going up the mountain. On hands and knees North bent closer —he may have imagined it, but the hoofs seemed smaller than the tracks of the logging horses, and the length of its stride shorter, as if someone were leading it by the bridle.

For a half hour he followed the winding snow road that climbed steadily back from the river into the higher reaches of the forest, and as he climbed his mind sought some explanation for this new turn of events. Certainly there was something foreboding in the knowledge that Pogue would make so important a move without giving him word. There was something premature about it all. Pogue must know that violence to a Forest Supervisor would be a sure way to harm his own plans.

Rapidly the world grew lighter, until looking back through the long purple shadows of the pines North could make out the rising sun, touching the shoulders of Lava Mountain to flame.

Another winter day, clear and bitter cold, was breaking over the Rockies.

On he went. The road had become steeper, narrower, and now only the tracks of one horse and several men lay before him. Still upward. About him hung the silence of frozen things. The trees at this high elevation were short and wind blown; while just above him, just at timber line, lay the lifeless region of everlasting snows.

Suddenly he stopped in baffled surprise. Ahead, at the foot of a steep slope the trail abruptly ended, and above him stretched a broken expanse of tumbled, jagged rocks, remnant of some ancient landslide that once had swept down through the forest, leaving nothing but a steeply inclining boulder field, bereft of soil or trees, and bare of snow. Here all tracks ended, and over that flinty surface of scattered rocks no trace remained of any hoofprints. Impatiently North circled, hoping to pick up some slight sign of the passing either of a horse or of men afoot.

But it was a hopeless task in all that waste of stone, and returning to where the trail ended, he stood in frowning uncertainty. To circle that boulder field would take long hours—perhaps days. Meanwhile his quarry might be hidden in some clump of timber awaiting just such pursuit. The glare of the unshaded snow caused him to lower his eyes, and again he gazed out over the trail.

Ahead Bounce stood whining, as if impatient, and at the sound a ray of faint hope rose. Sharply North called the dog to his side, and kneeling down, pointed to the horse's tracks.

"Nose them out, Bounce. Nose them out, boy. Where did they go?"

Wagging a bushy tail as if in comprehension of his master's wishes the dog sniffed eagerly at the frozen tracks, took a few steps beyond where the snows had melted, sniffed again, and now with nose close to the ground began scenting his way out over that sloping boulder field.

Not daring to speak lest he distract the dog's attention, North followed, his hobnailed pacs clicking on the loose stones. Winding his way among the rocks, bearing steadily to the right, Bounce led the way with the confidence of one following a fresh trail—and once—North felt his heart beat faster—a freshly chipped rock told of the steel-shod hoof of a horse. Still to

the right, and now the dog was leading him along a gentle downward slope just above timber line then out across an open space to where not over a quarter of a mile distant a clump of dark spruce stood in low relief against the sky. Never once at a loss, Bounce trotted on, stopping now and then to look back and wait impatiently for North, who followed at a long swinging walk that was almost a run.

At the edge of the timber Bounce stopped and looked eagerly up, for there, deep in the snow before them, lay the tracks of a horse, and the footprints of four men walking in single file. Exultantly North reached down to caress the dog's shaggy head, and sure at last of his quarry, plunged onward.

A few yards further on the trees stood thick about him. The trail wound down to the edge of a clump of willows, then up again to a small flat, and now very faintly the acrid smell of burning wood came to his nostrils. With a whispered order to the dog, he advanced cautiously, every sense alert. The smell of smoke grew stronger.

Suddenly North stopped, and in the same instant dropped flat upon the ground. Just ahead, seen dimly through the pines, a low log cabin loomed, its weatherbeaten, moldering walls telling a tale of age and long disuse—probably some prospector's headquarters of early days. One window was broken, and the roof tilted crazily, but smoke was coming from the chimney and—North's eyes were gleaming—within a small lean-to in the rear a horse stood tethered to a pine. Only the animal's hind quarters were visible, but to North's mind flashed a memory of Guthrie's big roan. Here, then, was the trail's end.

Crawling foot by foot to a screen of young spruce, North waited. Ten minutes passed, fifteen, a half hour. With the patient immobility of an Indian he crouched there, but no sound came from out that dark, low dwelling. Only the curling smoke, the closed door, and the black, sooty window, like a great leering eye.

Still keeping well back, North made a complete circle. No footsteps led away. Then men who had made those tracks were still inside.

Interminably the time passed. Blue shadows moved slowly beneath the rising sun, but in all that world of sky and snow no sound came to the silent watcher. Yet there was something sinister, something malevolent about this low, moldering cabin

hidden away among the trees. Something wildly fantastic too in the curling smoke and in those footprints that led up to the door with no other sign of human habitation, no least message of any living thing.

The sun rose higher, and with a start North remembered Mills' words—if Guthrie was to reach Lander that day no more time could be lost in this long, fruitless vigil. For a brief second he hesitated, then with no further attempt at concealment walked directly up to the closed door.

He knocked. No sound. With his fist he pounded on the door until a little shower of snow fell from the roof above, but the death-like silence of the place remained unaltered. Lifting the latch, North put his shoulder to the door and pushed.

To his surprise, it opened readily, and thrown forward by the force of his exertion, North strode headlong into a darkened, smoke-filled room. For an instant the contrast between blazing sunlight and the obscurity of the cabin blinded him, yet even without the aid of sight he was conscious of silent, watchful figures ranged about him. Slowly, the faint light strengthened; one by one dim objects detached themselves from the gloom, and now his peering eyes made out four men standing before him and four automatics pointing at his heart.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Behind North the door closed softly, and with a sharp click the latch fell, but throughout that darkened room no man moved. Yet even as he stood there North's eyes passed rapidly about the cabin, and with quickened heart-beat he saw, in a far-off corner, Guthrie, bound and helpless, tied to a chair.

But now a low laugh sounded behind him, and a familiar voice was whispering in his ear. "You get so very curious, eh, Meester Nort'? You want maybe to find out somet'ing. Well, what you do now?" Turning, North looked into the dark, threatening face of Jean L'Abat.

Corrin smiled. "Yes, I am curious, Jean. I'm curious about a couple of things—one of them is why you and Pogue are working behind my back."

Instantly L'Abat's hand shot out and covered North's mouth, preventing further speech, while he scowled angrily back at

Guthrie, then taking North by the arm, led him outside the cabin.

"What do you mean, behin' your back?"

"You know what I mean." A note of impatient anger was rising in North's voice. "We're all supposed to be working together, aren't we? Nothing was to be done until our plans were ready and the time ripe, and yet you pull something like this without my knowledge. Where do I come in? Do you think any of the men will take me seriously if I don't even know what's going on? Either I'm in or I'm out, Jean. If I'm out, I want to know it, and we'll drop the whole business."

Through the bright winter sunlight L'Abat blinked up at him. "You could not drop it now, my frien'—and live. You are too far in."

"Then tell me what's going on. This kidnapping Guthrie looks like a child's trick to me. What is gained by parading him over ten miles of country?"

"How do you find we are here?"

"You left a trail, didn't you?"

"Not across the rocks."

"No? Then how do you think I found you? The trouble with you, Jean, you believe all the world is a lot dumber than it really is. I tell you in a game like this you can't make blunders and still get by. If I could track you to this cabin, Guthrie's rangers can too—they're not entirely fools." North laughed, and the ring of derision brought a frown to L'Abat's face. "I thought Pogue had too much brains to do this sort of thing."

With growing misgiving L'Abat answered, "Meester Pogue do not know about this. This ees my idea."

"Oh, it is? Well, I want to be around when you break the glad news to him. Jean, you couldn't think of a better way to get this whole country overrun with forest rangers than by kidnapping their boss. One or two more good ideas like this and Pogue might just as well give up hope of licking the Forest Service."

Jean's close-set eyes were troubled, and North pressed his advantage. "This kind of thing is the easiest way to set the whole countryside against us and might even bring a squad of state police up here. We'd like that fine, wouldn't we? That would fit in nicely with Pogue's plan."

While he talked, North could see the gathering irresolution

on L'Abat's face. Already the man's slow mind had begun to regret his action.

Abruptly North asked, "Has Guthrie recognized any of you?"

L'Abat shook his head. "Not one. *J'en suis sur.* We wait for him beside the trail, we pull him from his horse down by the skidway, blindfold him and let him ride up here to the cabin."

"Your voices?"

"We 'ave not talk except to whisper."

North nodded. "That's the only sensible thing I've heard about the whole performance. But what was the idea? What do you want to do with him?"

"*Eh bien,* we take from his saddlebags all the survey notes. That will stop——"

"I know." Impatiently North interrupted. "It will stop action against the company on that timber deal—until Guthrie has another survey made. What's so important about a year's delay?"

Jean's arms spread out in a wide gesture of disappointment. "But ees it not something?"

Sadly North shook his head, as at a schoolboy who has failed to learn his lesson.

"I'm afraid, Jean, you're a little hasty, just a little hasty. But tell me—why did you bring him here?"

"Because we have not decide what to do wit' heem."

Again North shook his head. "You haven't thought anything through, have you? Well, I wouldn't care to change places with you when Bert Pogue hears of your little brainwave, and I hate to think of the tale Guthrie's going to tell when he gets back into Wolfshead."

A look of slow comprehension crept into L'Abat's eyes. "Then it may be better if Meester Guthrie do not go back, yes?"

North started in sudden realization of the kind of man he was dealing with. For a moment he pretended to consider.

"No," he said at last, "if Guthrie disappears, it might make things worse. Why not tell Pogue everything and let him decide? You've done something that can't be undone, but I'd like to give you one piece of advice. Whatever Pogue decides, it isn't going to look good for you and your men to be missing on the very day when everybody will be out hunting for Guthrie. If I were you I'd take myself down to Wolfshead and see that plenty people know you're there."

L'Abat grinned. "Ah, the alibi."

"Call it whatever you want. You're not going to need more than one able-bodied man to take care of Guthrie the way you've got him hog-tied. Go down, tell Pogue what you've done and find out from him what the next step ought to be. He's not going to be pleased, Jean. You've gone too far now without his knowledge—I'd lose no time."

Anxiously L'Abat pondered these new and disturbing thoughts while North watched him narrowly, then at last in perplexity he sighed. "Meester Pogue, he often say my brains they are not so good. Mebbe not. I think you too are much wiser than I am—although—" The strong yellow teeth flashed in an almost childlike smile. "Although you are not one half so good the fighter. But now you are right. I go to find Meester Pogue and make the alibi. Larsen, he will stay here, and tonight I send someone up. Will you come wit' us?"

"No, I'm off to camp. And tell Pogue those two new men he sent up last week won't do—I don't want orators, I want lumberjacks." With a short whistle to Bounce, North made his way down the trail.

But as he walked his mind weighed the question of how far he had been able to take in the slow-witted woods boss. Perhaps entirely. Always a dangerous animal, L'Abat's greatest value to Pogue lay in his unquestioning obedience. It was only when he attempted a stroke of his own that he blundered—as now. But North realized that Pogue would not be so easily fooled when L'Abat told him the tale. What would they do with Guthrie then? North could not be sure. With the present temper of the loggers there was no safety for the Supervisor bound hand and foot in that forest cabin, and if Pogue, with relentless logic, should decide it might be dangerous to turn Guthrie loose—the unfinished thought brought North to a full stop in the middle of the trail, and he remembered Pogue's words, "I let no obstacle stand in my way."

He looked at his watch—the chances of getting Guthrie to Lander were fading and he hastened on until he reached the rock field, then turned at a sharp right angle. Climbing straight up among the boulders for a hundred yards to be sure his own tracks were lost, North doubled back into the timber and with infinite caution picked his way step by step through the heavy fringe of spruce until he stood looking down again on the snow-

covered roof of the cabin. Through the broken chimney a thin column of smoke was still pouring, but down the trail L'Abat walked rapidly, followed by two men, and North knew that Jean was taking his advice and returning to Wolfshead. One man, then, remained to be dealt with, and from his hiding place North turned over his new problem.

But fate itself decided. Hardly had the three loggers disappeared down the trail than Guthrie's remaining captor stepped to the cabin door—a lanky, flaxen-haired Swede whom North remembered as Larsen, one of the more dangerous trouble-makers Pogue had eagerly seized on as a useful henchman. Among the loggers Larsen enjoyed the reputation of being "quick on the draw." He stood now, hands deep in his pockets, looking idly down the trail. Up among the concealing spruce, North made no move until Larsen turned and closed the door, then he motioned Bounce to his side. "Stay here, boy," he whispered, and bending low, crept down behind the cabin until he stopped within a few yards of Guthrie's horse.

At the slight sound of his advance the animal started and pulled nervously back on the halter rope, but quietly North spoke to him, making no move until the roan had grown accustomed to his presence. Then step by step he walked forward, stopping when the horse showed signs of increasing panic, until at last he stood directly by the animal's side, and reaching up, stroked the warm, velvety nose. The animal quivered at his touch, but the eyes showed no signs of fear, and now, very carefully, North unfastened the halter. Holding the reins in his left hand, he pulled out his automatic, cocked it, then led the horse around the side of the cabin toward the trail. Here he laid the rope over the animal's neck, wrapped the reins about the saddle-horn, and suddenly drawing back his hand, dealt a heavy blow on the horse's flanks.

Terrified by that unexpected attack, the animal snorted, reared, and with a scream of fright galloped down the trail. For a hundred yards the roan ran at full speed, then ears back and nostrils distended, he stopped, and whirling, faced toward the cabin. At that wild clatter of hoofs, Larsen had thrown open the door, and, gun in hand, was staring in angry surprise after the fugitive animal. A volley of oaths, and as the horse turned again, Larsen raised his gun and fired. Too high. Above that racing target a pine twig came floating downward, and now in

mortal terror at the whining bullet, Guthrie's horse pounded its mad way toward the timber.

With another curse Larsen was after him, running clumsily through the snow, hoping to get another shot before the horse reached the logging road, while crouching low against the cabin wall, North watched that wild pursuit, and the instant Larsen's figure was lost among the trees, he darted inside the door.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was the work of a moment to seize a knife from the table and cut Guthrie loose, and now reaching upward, North tore the strip of dirty linen from the man's temples.

Slowly Guthrie opened his eyes. His face was deathly pale, both arms hung useless at his sides, the circulation cut off by cruelly tight bonds that for hours had held him captive. But already North was whispering, "We've got to get out of here. If you can't walk, I'll carry you. When Larsen comes back and finds me, the jig's up. Are you able to stand?"

With an uneasy glance out the door, North pulled the supervisor to his feet, but the strain of that fixed position had been too much, and with a little groan Guthrie sank back into the chair.

"I can't move an inch," he gasped. "My feet are like stone. Wait a few moments."

"We can't wait even one minute." North thrust the severed pieces of rope into the fire. "I'll carry you up the slope."

He had reached forward to pick up his automatic when a sharp intake of breath from Guthrie made him turn, and following the supervisor's eyes, he saw Larsen's face glaring through the window. For the space of a heartbeat those two men held each other's gaze, then with silent swiftness both automatics raised. Two bursts of flame, two crashing shots that were almost one, a tinkle of shattered glass, and quick as a cat North dropped flat on the floor while a tearing rip through the collar of his mackinaw told him Larsen's shot had missed by an inch.

About him rose the acrid smell of smoke. He made no move, waiting, watching that window, listening to catch the faintest sound, but above the quickened beating of his heart came only a faint stirring of wind in the spruce tops and the slow, steady

dripping of water from the eaves. He put his ear to the rough boards of the floor. Nothing.

For long moments North waited, then with a warning gesture to Guthrie, crawled on hands and knees across the cabin and disappeared through the open door. Again silence, a silence that for Guthrie was fast becoming unendurable. With each passing second he expected to hear the roar of an automatic, and at last, in spite of numbed limbs, he rose and with short, uncertain steps walked across the floor. But as the Supervisor reached the center of the room a tall form darkened the doorway, and with that noiseless tread of his North entered.

His face was impassive, and without a word he replaced the empty cartridge.

"Shall we go now?" The voice, too, was void of expression.

"But——?"

"Larsen won't interfere," came the grim reply, and together they stepped outside.

Rounding the cabin, the Supervisor cast one glance behind—a figure lay huddled in the snow beneath the window, and silently both men turned down the trail.

Slowly the circulation returned to Guthrie's veins, and at last he was following on North's heels, swinging rapidly out over the rocky slope where no trail would be left for possible pursuit. But it was not until they had put the shoulder of the mountain between them and the cabin that they paused to rest behind a clump of aspen.

Guthrie was first to speak. "North, I don't know the answer to all this. Perhaps you do. I've been told you had thrown in with the loggers—that you and Mills had quarreled. In Wolfshead they say you're hand and glove with the toughest of Pogue's outfit, yet today you risk your life to help me get away from them. Is there an answer?"

North nodded. "Yes, there's an answer, but I'd rather not give you that answer yet. And if you want to reach Lander today we haven't time to talk. There's a car and a ranger waiting for you at the foot of the trail."

But Guthrie shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good to go down now. They took the map and survey notes from my saddle-bags." Bitterly the Supervisor raised his clenched fist. "The first blood is Bert Pogue's."

"Tell me what happened to you last night."

Guthrie frowned and rubbed his throbbing wrists. "I came up to get the rest of those notes on the trespass case, and after I left Mills I went down to inspect a skidway. I had just got there when something struck me and knocked me from the saddle, then three or four men seized me. I was blindfolded and taken to that cabin."

"Did you recognize any of the men?"

"No—none except——" Guthrie made a little gesture, "except the one up there in the snow. But I think I can prove enough to make it hot for Pogue's bunch of thugs."

North laid his hand on the forester's arm. "I'm going to ask you to do something—something I know you won't like. Let this thing drop. You might—you very likely could convict two or three loggers of shanghaiing you into the woods, but what use would that be? Pogue would say they were drunk, and probably for the looks of things he would discharge them. Nothing would be accomplished. It's far better just to say you were taken to the cabin by unknown men and that you broke your bonds."

"They'll find that body back there."

"But they'll say nothing about it. Why should they?" Very earnestly North added, "Believe me, there's a bigger game being played out here than any mere personal animosity. It's bigger than either you or I, and we can only win by outwaiting and outthinking them."

Guthrie was watching him closely. "That's strange talk from you, North."

"It may seem strange now, it may even sound insincere. Wouldn't it be better to judge me by my actions and not by my talk?"

"You're right." Unhesitatingly Guthrie took the man's hand. "You put your head in a noose for me. If it hadn't been for you——" He left the sentence uncompleted, then added, "I'll do whatever you ask."

"Good." Corrin rose. "If you take no steps they may think they've frightened you. That's part of their campaign." With a nod and a wave of the hand he disappeared down the winding woods trail.

But there was more than one troublesome thought to keep North unwelcome company as he walked through the forest that winter morning. It was one thing to throw the simple-

minded Jean off the scent—it would be quite another to allay the suspicions of Pogue. Clearly North realized that however criminal and unscrupulous the man might be there were few keener or more dangerous brains than Bert Pogue's. He knew, too, that Pogue would not wait for absolute certainty before he acted; if he suspected strongly enough that North had a part in the duel at that abandoned cabin, he would lose no time in ridding the world of one who, in his own words, was "a dangerous obstacle." It was playing with a very dangerous kind of fire, but North had gone too far now to turn back.

So it came as no surprise when late that afternoon word was sent to the upper camp that Pogue wanted urgently to see him at the commissary, and it was a silent commentary on North's own estimate of the interview that before he went down the trail he thrust his heavy .45 into a shoulder holster beneath his mackinaw.

North had never seen Pogue's face more somber than when he stepped inside the back office of the commissary and found him and Jean L'Abat together. Then man's eyes held a look of puzzled hostility, while Jean sat pulling on a long black pipe and made no sign beyond a gruff grunt to acknowledge North's presence.

Pogue lost no time. "Jean tells me you walked in on him at that cabin near Lava Mountain this morning. What were you doing up at timberline? There wasn't any road work for you to inspect. Was it—just accident?"

"No accident at all. I met Mills coming down the trail with a tale about the Supervisor being missing. He talked wildly of getting out a posse and wiring the state police—he told me he had found Guthrie's badge down on Skidway 7 and suspected dirty work. Without actually saying so, Mills made it very clear that he suspected me. It looked queer, so thinking it over, I cut through the timber to the logging road above the skidway and I was interested to see the tracks of four men and a saddle horse in the trail."

"How did you know it was a saddle horse?"

"It wasn't rough-shod and there were no sled tracks."

Pogue nodded, and North went on. "I saw something still more curious—those tracks were all bound for the upcountry toward timberline. That combination of tracks and Mills' story made me decide to look into things. It didn't seem possible you

would make a move as serious as that without telling me, but I followed the trail to the cabin and found your tame grizzly with Guthrie. Maybe he's already told you the rest— I hope he told you all I said—the whole thing was premature, poorly planned, and didn't show a single spark of intelligence."

Pogue smiled thinly. "You're one hundred per cent right about that part. It was damned nonsense. We could have got those survey notes in easier ways—and it wouldn't have mattered much if we never got them. But what I'm more concerned about is this: Guthrie got away."

North's face darkened. He whirled toward L'Abat. "I thought you were going to leave a man to guard him."

"I do. I leave Larsen."

"Well?"

Pogue's eyes were blazing up into North's. "Four hours ago Larsen was found outside the cabin, shot between the eyes."

Silence. A dangerously accusing silence, while Pogue and L'Abat sat with unblinking gaze fixed on the tall man before them. And even as North looked down into those hostile and suspicious eyes he knew that his own fate was hanging in the balance—he stood on trial before a tribunal that knew neither mercy nor regret.

"Did Guthrie shoot him?" Only a kind of speculative wonder sounded in North's voice.

Pogue's hand waved contemptuously toward Jean. "My bright foreman here emptied both saddlebags, but he didn't take the trouble to search Guthrie himself. It's pretty well known he carries a .38." Pogue's long fingers tapped the table, then suddenly rising, he thrust his face close to North's. "Larsen was shot with a .45. What caliber gun do you carry, North?"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

BEFORE that thinly veiled accusation North's jaw squared and his voice rang sharply back. "I carry a .45. Just what do you suppose that proves?"

"If I knew it might make things easier for all of us." Pogue's drooping eye passed uncertainly to L'Abat. He was plainly puzzled, for North showed no least sign of fear, although he must have recognized the menace that lay behind Pogue's ques-

tion and the deadly quality of his suppressed anger. At a loss, Pogue chewed the end of his cigar, and when again he spoke, there was a new note of irresolution in his voice.

"North, I wish I could come to a decision about you once and for all. You've got it in you to be the strongest ally I have, and you've got it in you to be my worst enemy. I'm damned if I can tell which you're going to be."

North's eyes had narrowed. "Wouldn't it be a wise thing to decide one way or another, once and for all? Now suppose you let me talk for a minute. You've practically accused me of killing Larsen. Well, that's all right with me, but until you decide whether I did or not, I might just as well stand on the sidelines. So long as you only trust me half way I'm not going to be able to help you, no matter how much I may want to. You yourself are the only one who can decide whether you want to treat me as a friend or as an enemy, but it's time you made some decision, and if that decision is to keep me as an ally, I want to know what goes on. I'm tired of being on the fringe of things. I can't do anything blindfolded, and if I'm not to be trusted the deal had better be off."

Without waiting for a reply North rose and buttoned his mackinaw, but at the door he stopped to look down at L'Abat, and a brief smile touched his lips. "Another stroke of genius like yours and we'll have half the National Guard up here."

A feeling of infinite relief went with North as he walked down the commissary steps that night. At least he had gained time. He had succeeded in filling Pogue's mind with doubt—beyond that only the future would reveal. It was already dark in Wolfshead and he turned down the unlighted street, then with a quick look behind, hurried toward the Forest Service office. The door was closed, but behind the glazed panel a light burned, and without knocking, North entered.

A thin spiral of cigarette smoke curled upward from behind the Supervisor's desk, and beneath the light he saw Helen Guthrie bending over a pile of papers. At his entrance she rose from her chair and without a word pulled down North's face and kissed him. Her gray eyes were luminous.

"Jack told me how you risked your life for him this morning. We both owe you a big debt, Corrin North."

But North was frowning. "He shouldn't have told you." His voice had become deadly serious. "Not even your husband

knows the full meaning of the game that is being played here, nor the steps that Pogue would gladly take to win. Mills and your husband must watch every move—but there must be no leaks. Not another word about me. It would take very little for me to disappear just as your husband disappeared—only this time it would be permanently."

Her face was a little paler. "I don't pretend to know what you are doing, or why, but I can sense the danger of it. This whole countryside is so divided into factions that no one can even guess the undercurrents at work here. And yet—I wish Cass might know what you've done today. She only hears one side, Pogue's side, and I can't bear to have her believe the tales they tell of you. You see, she thinks——"

"Cass Mirov must never know." North turned so abruptly that Helen Guthrie stopped.

"But is it fair to let her go on thinking the things she is bound to think about you—the things Pogue tells her of the trouble he has keeping you from violence against the Forest Service? Why, before today I believed them myself."

North's voice was final. "It's not going to make much difference what Cass thinks about me. And I hardly believe it will matter a great deal to her whether I turn out to be one kind of person or another. Our ways lie apart."

But Helen Guthrie stood slowly shaking her head back and forth. "Has anyone ever told you that you were a hard man, Corrin?"

"Some have told me that. My life has been lived in the hard places of the world. I've been among men where either you were hard, or you lost."

"And you didn't want to lose?"

"Who does?"

"I don't know. Sometimes the greatest victory may come by losing."

"Would you believe that if your husband lost this fight he's making now?"

"I wasn't thinking of a fight. Perhaps I was thinking of love."

"Love." The tall man echoed the sound, his eyes fixed on the blackness of the night outside. It was as if he were testing the value of that word—a word he chose not to dwell upon, and when again he spoke it was to turn deliberately to another subject.

"When you see Mills, tell him for me that everything will probably be quiet for a while, but to be careful."

"You mean—actual danger?"

"Just that. Both your husband and his ranger force may soon be in personal danger greater than they know—but not yet."

"And you, yourself. What of your own danger?"

North smiled and picked up his hat. "When I find I'm in real danger I'll do something sudden about it."

And long after the sound of his departure had died down the wooden stairs the woman sat gazing, chin cupped in her hand, meditating upon this strange, unrevealing man who in the space of a few months had become a source of speculation and wonder throughout the Wind River country. She remembered many things—how her husband had thought North's face was familiar, and how North himself had turned the talk aside.

Then there was Cass. Somewhere in the past, perhaps in the not far distant past, the destinies of this unknown man and Catherine Mirov had met and left a scar on both of them. Could that be why he regarded danger so lightly? Had something happened back there to make life itself less precious to him, so that with open eyes he walked amid a world of hostile men with contemptuous self-assurance and steely nerves, playing a game that only few might hope to play? Weary at last with those unanswered questions she turned once more to her writing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

WINTER closed in overnight.

By dawn the long awaited December blizzard was sweeping the peaks of the Rockies beneath its lashing blast, bringing a grim foretaste of days to come. For throughout those following months of storm and piercing cold Wolfshead and the logging camps would be cut off from the rest of the world except for an occasional wagon train bearing mail and provisions. And for the next week the clouds above Starlight Pass dropped successive snow blankets day after day until all the country lay white and gleaming out to the Painted Desert. A world suddenly transformed—a world desolate of human things. Loggers, tie-cutters and forest rangers stayed in their cabins, heaping high their fires with logs, "holding up," until the storms should

pass. Inch by inch the snow scale before Mills' station sank beneath the snow until at last only its tip was visible, and at the Swede camp the drifts were flowing over the roofs, forcing men to cut paths that were almost tunnels between their cabins and the bunk house. White winter lay across the land.

Work in the woods had stopped for the time, but near the river Pogue's haulers laboured for long hours, breaking out roads, heaping the skidways high with logs, making ready for the great spring drive. And the older loggers, foreseeing a winter of heavy snows, took comfort in the knowledge that the more snow water to feed Wind River the following spring, the greater were their chances of driving the logs and ties downstream. Each year they had been hampered by lack of water. Each year as the ice went out and the first head of flood waters subsided, thousands of logs were left stranded among the shallows just above the rapids of the gorge. It had cost the company many dollars to labouriously prod those logs with peavy and picaroon back into the channel again, and more than once the mills had been forced to shut down for lack of timber. But this year—and here the old timers would look out the bunk-house windows at the thickly falling snow—this year it might be different.

Up in the snowbound camps that winter men talked for a time of Larsen's death. Wild theories were spun when woodsmen sat about the stoves at night and many an unanswered question asked as to how he had met his fate, but none talked openly, nor did either Pogue or L'Abat ever speak of it to North again, and as winter wore on the memory of the surly Swede faded.

Meanwhile those short, bleak days passed quickly enough for the Forest Service men. Throughout each precious hour of daylight they worked, measuring the timber at every skidway, and at night adding up their scale books, making out reports for the main office in Denver. Since Christmas the hard winter had added to their labors, forcing them to dig out the skidways before they could count and measure the logs.

"I've personally shoveled enough snow to provide every man, woman and child in North America with six snowballs apiece," Mills complained, and the rest of the rangers agreed. Yet despite their best efforts they were falling behind. Logs and ties were coming down to the skidways faster than they could scale them,

and with each storm fresh snows drifted over them, hiding them from sight.

But Pogue was only beginning. Throughout the winter he found new ways of hampering the foresters, and on every opportunity complained that they were holding up the progress of his work, meanwhile painstakingly collecting every incident to prove that the men of the Forest Service were making it impossible for the company to carry on. But he had not broken them down—he had not destroyed their morale.

And with at least one part of his program Pogue was well pleased. By late winter he had collected at the Swede Camp a crew of men who might be depended on to carry out his orders as soon as Spring came. Spring—that would be the testing time, and with this in view, Pogue spared no efforts in adding to his camp the worst of the derelicts that chance brought to Wolfshead.

Meanwhile among the men North's own prestige was growing. Barely four months had passed since the night he had fought that ill-fated battle with L'Abat, but even in that short time North had changed visibly. The pallid skin of his past fever was becoming brown and weathered by sun and storm. The gaunt frame of those early Wolfshead days had filled out and his eyes were losing what Jean L'Abat called his "lone wolf" look. Cold, keen air, a constant fight against the bleak forces of winter, the long hours of physical work all added to the heightened color of his cheeks and the brightness of his eyes. Gruelling work, but he thrived on it. The depth of his chest and the broad sweep of his shoulders seemed to increase as the weeks went by until, accustomed as they were to robust specimens of manhood, loggers and foresters alike looked on that powerful figure with approving and sometimes envious eyes.

Often in the short evenings before dark he boxed with the younger men of the camp, making no attempt to knock them out, depending solely on his catlike agility to elude their fiercest attacks. Men marveled at him. He seemed absolutely tireless—out in the snow for twelve hours on skis or webs, handling an ax or saw, but at the day's end always ready for a race and a wrestle with Bounce or a set-to with the boxing gloves. It was this sort of thing that made the men look up to him with increasing trust and friendliness. It had, also, another result—un-

known to North himself, men began talking of a return match with L'Abat, and once a swarthy Finn, watching North boxing, said, with more truth than even Corrin cared to admit, "So soon you mak' ready for anoder fight wit' Jean nex' T'anksgiving, eh?"

And—perhaps more important still—he was becoming more friendly, less aloof and self-contained. Nan Lakin may have been the cause of that. For she made no secret of the fact that among all the men of the camp North was her favorite, and often when he came back to his cabin at the day's end he would find the stove glowing and Nan herself seated on his table, swinging her long legs.

"Supper," she would call. "Come and get it, old iceberg."

Of all the men, Doctor Mirov without seeming to try had gained the confidence and friendship of North. Sometimes with Cass, sometimes alone, the kindly old doctor made a point of dropping in at North's cabin on his frequent trips to the Swede Camp and often brought up books. On the last occasion he and his daughter had returned from the bedside of a sick rancher, and weary after the long climb, they sat down before North's fire. With a sigh of contentment Doctor Mirov noticed the open volume on the table.

"Books," he had said, tapping his blackened pipe, "without books life would be a mistake."

North nodded, adding, "There are too many men in this camp for whom life is wholly a mistake."

"I know. I also see them—misfits, warped ones, men who had no chance. It saddens me—although I should have lived beyond the years when any human frailty could touch me. And yet it does. Often I wonder what these men want out of life."

North made no answer, and musingly the old man went on. "Power—that is what many of them want. It is the gadfly that keeps Bert Pogue from ever being content. I think the two great compelling forces of the world are ambition and love. Well, one cannot live without love."

Standing with his back to the window, North's gaze was fixed on the girl. She had thrown off the heavy mittens, and opening her jacket at the throat, leaned forward toward the welcome warmth of the fire. The glow of the firelight, catching her eyes, seemed to linger there, as if they burned with a luminosity of their own, and almost resentfully he observed the

clear, soft warmth of her skin, pink from the cold winter air outside and the warmth of the fire within.

She smiled softly back at her father.

"What a sentimentalist you are getting to be, Dad. Love isn't always necessary." She turned toward North. "Is it?"

The question was almost a challenge. He looked down at her.

"Do you want me to answer that?"

Swiftly the girl flushed, but she met his eyes. "Yes. Answer." Her voice was almost a whisper.

For some reason the old physician across the room paused in the act of lighting his pipe to watch them.

"I think," the tall man answered slowly, "there are in the world two kinds of people who are not fit for love. They live without it because they are unworthy. Some of them," the low voice filled the room with its deep resonance, "some of them are cowards who find they are afraid to give themselves up to love—the ones who flee. There are many of those."

"And the others?"

"The others are those who make a game of love, who think of it as something to pass an idle hour or two. They too, I should say, are unfit. What would you say?"

She made no answer, but sat looking into the fire until the doctor, from his corner, broke the silence.

"Strange to hear a man like you talk of love. I should say you were interested in sterner things—in, let us say, the battle of life. For you have that within you which makes you a born fighter and leader. And I find myself wondering whether you will use that power for good or bad." He smiled. "They tell tales about you down in Wolfshead, Corrin—not that those tales interest me greatly, for I am not a judge, I am a healer. But I also dislike waste. I should not care to see your qualities made to serve unworthy ends." He rose and laid a hand on North's shoulder. "You will forgive an old physician who becomes sometimes a busybody in spite of his better motives."

He walked toward the door, then turned to Cass. "I promised Bert to drop in at the Swede Camp and see how those two loggers are getting along."

As his daughter rose, he said, "No, you've done enough today. Wait. I'll be back in a half hour."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE DOOR closed, and instinctively the eyes of those two met through a silence broken only by the low roar of flames rising in the chimney. North's face, with its deep shadows, was expressionless, the gray eyes steady as steel, and rising, Cass walked to where he stood.

"Must it always be an armed truce between us, Corrin?" she asked. "Can't we at least be friends? Whenever I am here you build a wall about yourself, and I don't want that wall to exist. I want to feel that I can come to you without any duelling between us, simply——"

"And as a friend?" he mocked, "after all that has passed?"

"Please don't." Her voice was trembling. "I couldn't stand that now. Don't you see I'm unhappy? Can't you see how much I need the very friendship you pretend to despise?' For a moment his eyes softened. For a moment the hands raised as if to take that small head between them, but with an effort he straightened, and in the same impersonal voice he asked, "What's wrong, Cass?"

"It's about you—and Bert." She paused, turned away from him, then hurried on. "It may be I have no right to talk to you of this, but all around me there seem to be whisperings and rumors. On one side and another I hear tales about you and about Bert Pogue—tales of threatening dangers and of still worse things ahead—but they're always so vague and elusive, and—" Both small hands raised to the girl's head in a gesture of almost childlike perplexity. "I don't know what to believe. I don't know where to go for advice."

"Just what have you been hearing?"

"Many things. Sometimes I hear the rangers talking. They say you're becoming a leader of the worst element among the loggers. Some of the men in the commissary say that in spite of Bert's attempt to keep peace between the Forest Service and the loggers, you are goading the men on, trying to make it hard for the rangers."

North flushed. "Did Bert Pogue tell you that?"

"No—" She hesitated.

He smiled. "All right. Go on, Cass. What have you heard about Pogue himself?"

"Only what the forestry people say—that he is trying to fight the Forest Service, that he was the guiding hand behind the attacks on Harry Mills and Jack Guthrie. Do you think that's true, Corrin?"

"I don't believe Pogue had anything to do with the Guthrie matter. But as to his enmity for the Forest Service, you're not surprised at that, are you?"

"No. Not until they hint that he fights unfairly. Helen Guthrie won't talk about it, but I know she thinks just that."

"Why don't you ask Pogue himself?"

"I did. I was sorry afterwards, for I know I hurt him. He only told me that I shouldn't doubt; that in every big undertaking there is always criticism, and always unfair tales. And I realize that must be so. I don't want to doubt him. I want to believe in him."

"And in me, Cass?"

"Of course in you."

"You're going to find that hard." North picked up a scale stick from the table while his somber eyes rose to the window, but unseen by Cass and unnoticed by himself the knuckles on his hands stood out white and bloodless, so tight was his grip.

From high above them into the silence of the cabin came the far-off cracking of the northern lights; through the window, like the ghost of a rainbow, the pale, faint glow of the aurora gleamed, rising and falling, casting long bands of bluish radiance across the sky. They watched it until soon the light died.

At last he turned. "I'm wondering, Cass, why you tell me these things—me, of all people."

"Because I can't turn to anyone else. I can't ask Father. He's too detached—he simply doesn't hear what people say, he doesn't care. And I knew you'd tell me the truth."

"The truth is dangerous sometimes." North's eyes were still turned away. "We have to be ready for the truth, Cass. It's too strong a fare until we're prepared for it. Tell me, when are you going to marry Pogue?"

"It was to have been last Christmas, but—I put it off."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because everything's so uncertain. Partly because of these whisperings. I want to get to the bottom of it!" she burst out. "But even you seem to be in a conspiracy of silence against me."

Accusingly she faced him, her lips trembling, and again that old desire returned to protect and shield her, to hold her against the world. At last he answered, "Before very long I may end this conspiracy of silence, Cass, but not now. Too many things are at stake. You see even now, just as in other days, I find it hard to resist you. Even now you almost make me believe that I'm necessary to your happiness, and I know I'm not. I even doubt that Bert Pogue is, and yet perhaps of the two I need you most."

Violently he flung the scale stick from him. "No, I've nothing to tell you yet, Cass. But I have a word of advice, and it's this: Don't be a coward. Don't run away from life as you ran away from me. All the world hates cowards—the people who shrink from living their own lives, the people who are afraid to live dangerously."

*"Dangerously."* The word came from the doorway, where Doctor Mirov was looking with a little smile of amusement at North.

"Dangerously," he repeated. "I wonder what it means to live dangerously in this unpredictable world of ours?" He pointed regretfully toward the set of chessmen that stood on a table. "It is a great temptation to stop and play at chess with you, Corrin, but we must be getting down the trail."

With a friendly handshake he turned, and followed by Cass, went out into the night.

But long after those two had left him, North sat by the lamp smoking. For a time he brooded upon an unpleasant thought—had the girl's questions been inspired by Pogue? Was it one of Pogue's ways of learning just where North stood? Quickly he shrugged the possibility aside. Yet one thing at least was certain—Pogue himself had not yet decided whether to number North among his friends or enemies. Well, each day Pogue remained doubtful was another day gained, and not until he reached a decision would he become really dangerous.

Weary at last with thought, North looked down at the dog. "So long as they're puzzled about us, Bounce, old boy," he confided, "we haven't much to worry over."

And Bounce wagged his tail in sleepy assent.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE LONG WINTER was passing. Cold, glittering days were giving way to the first hesitant heraldings of spring. High overhead wild geese flocked in great triangles across the sky, winging their way northward while men looked up to hear their heart-thrilling honking in the upper air, and watching them, they knew that not far distant were those brief, bright sunlit days of Wyoming summer. Already a soft haze lay like a curtain over the lower country, and the last waning snowstorms sweeping down from Starlight Pass brought only a few wet flakes that melted swiftly beneath the noonday sun.

Skis and snowshoes no longer helped in that clinging mixture of snow and water, and the rangers' horses plowed belly-deep as they made their way out over the forest trails, while the roads that had stretched like gleaming ribbons beyond the foothills were fast becoming impassable bogs of mud.

Spring was coming—North's first springtime in Wind River. For him they had passed rapidly, those six months, but just ahead he knew the time of testing lay. And this year spring was coming early, catching unprepared both loggers and rangers alike, until alarmed at the rapid melting of the snows, Pogue called his crew chiefs down to the commissary.

"I had a look at the river this morning," he told them, his voice sharp with impatience. "Before long the ice is going out, and I don't have to remind you that if we miss flood water this year we won't get out the logs. We've always had trouble driving this river—either it's in full flood or it's damned near dry. We've got to catch it right. Remember what happened last year—the river went down before the drive got well started, and it took three months to work the logs over the shallows."

Pogue glared up at the men about him. "Make up your minds that we're not going to repeat last year's mistake. Part of the winter's cut is still back in the woods. The sled roads are melting fast. From now on I want day and night shifts until every log is down by the river, ready to throw in when the ice breaks. Get it?"

Each man nodded. Each realized that if the first surging flood of water should go by before the logs were ready, the mills far down on the plains would suffer from lack of timber to feed

the ever-hungry saws. Long, red-barked logs of spruce; straight, clear lengths of pine; ties and poles, hewn and peeled by the calloused hands of many workers—all these the river in its first great surge of spring flood must carry down through granite gorges and out across the wide sagebrush plains over many a meandering mile of prairie and desert to where the mills awaited.

And now the ice was thinning. At night deep rumblings rose from the lower gorge, as if once more the river had become a living, throbbing thing, impatient of its long slumber, eager to be gone. Meanwhile, in preparation for the fast approaching drive, logs were hurried down from out the forest over roads that each day became more impassable. Even now, aided by the freezing temperatures of night, the teams could haul for only a few hours in the morning, and by noon the steel runners of the sleds and sharp-shod hoofs of the horses, had cut up the road-beds until they were worthless for further use. Killing work for both men and animals.

L'Abat took everyone that could be spared—cooks, clerks from the commissary, even the assistant bookkeeper, men and boys from the surrounding country, ranchers and cow-punchers —he scoured the land to augment his crews. Anything to win in that race against time, to bring down the logs before the precious moments passed and that first height of water should rush by them, leaving their cut stranded to rot and warp until another year. So all through those days of early spring the woods resounded to the shouts of haulers, cursing, encouraging, forcing on their tired, sweating horses, and to the deep bell-like booming of logs as they rolled from off the sleds and out along the skidways.

The rangers too, were busy—busy as never before. Every log had to be scaled and stamped with the Forest Service brand before the drive began, yet it was becoming impossible for the small handful of foresters to keep abreast of the crews Pogue had suddenly thrown into the woods. Three times Guthrie wired frantically to Denver asking for more men, but no help came, and even more frequently now Pogue complained of costly delays because the rangers were falling behind.

Meanwhile, along the narrow banks of Wind River the skid-ways above the gorge piled higher and higher. Early dawn found the loggers out in the forest roads, rolling the logs with

cant hook and peavy, skidding ties and poles down to the stream bank. And early dawn found Mills with scale stick and notebook, working with the rest of the forest crew, scaling, culling, counting the ties.

Then suddenly, overnight, the ice broke.

For two days a warm chinook wind had been blowing from off the Painted Desert, and aided by the cloudless sun, was rapidly rotting the covering of snow and ice from off the hills. Trails and logging roads were transformed into rushing streams, mud-brown torrents, all hurrying down toward Wind River, where long cracks spread like giant cobwebs across the ice. And many times during those two days rose the deep, unforgettable turbulence of tons on tons of snow grinding its irresistible way down over the steep slopes of the Rockies, hurling high into the air a cloud of white, thin mist as it plunged into some gulch or hidden canyon.

Men shook their heads. The snow was going off too fast. Unless freezing nights slowed up those swollen torrents——

Then shortly after midnight the end came. Above the wind and above the rushing of waters in a million streams, a splitting roar ripped its way through the night. A crash like thunder, a booming resonance that swelled and rolled back into the dark forest, telling the men of the Rockies that Wind River had at last stampeded and with its burden of rotting ice was gathering to rush headlong from narrow mountain gorges out toward the freedom of wider banks.

Already the first head waters were in motion. From his cabin in the upper Swede Camp, Jean L'Abat heard that warning roar, and leaping from his bunk, ran to where the circular saw hung that served the camp as a dinner bell. Seizing a roughlock, Jean struck the great steel disk with all his might until it rang out through the darkness, bringing the men, sleepy and muttering, from their bunks.

The ice was going out! No need or time for words—each man knew the part he was to play, and silently seizing axes and cant hooks, they started down the slippery trails to the skidways. Even old Buffalo Lakin heard that message of angry waters from his cabin on Sheridan Creek and hobbled over the ice road to aid in the coming drive. The night crews were still at work, and from afar the constant drop and splash of logs rose along the pine fringed banks. The men worked steadily, looming like

ghostly shadows against the snow, rolling log after log from off the sleds and out along the rollways, prodding them with cant hooks and peavy, keeping them moving, guiding them over the edge of the stream until by dawn the surging river was dotted with tens of thousands of logs that bobbed and bumped and whirled down that yellow, foaming stream.

The drive was on. No time to rest or think of rest that day, for loggers or rangers either. Already the first headwaters were in motion, and within a few days the crest would be past. Long before noon the cooks from the Swede Camp brought great steaming milk-pails filled with coffee, thick slabs of beef and buttered bread, and hardly pausing from their work, the men made hasty meals, then hurried back to the skidways while through it all, raging like a mad man up and down the river, Jean L'Abat urged them on.

No sparing the teams now—no sparing either beasts or men. Heartbreakingly the drivers flogged their horses through morasses of half frozen mud, forcing their way over fast disappearing roads back into the forest where the last of the winter's cut still lay.

From early dawn the forest men worked beside the loggers, Mills on one side of Wind River, Guthrie on the other, leading their small corps of rangers, meeting the haulers as they drove up beside the skidways, working grimly to keep pace, scaling each stick of timber as it came to them, slushing through wet snow, soaked to the waist, fingers numb and bleeding, but somehow managing to keep abreast. Dangerous work—even with sharp caulked boots the slippery logs presented a perilous foothold high above the whirling waters.

All too swiftly the morning passed. Each hour the river was rising. By noon it had torn away the plank bridge thrown across the lower camp and now from below the gorge the river's deep, angry roar rose louder, as if at last it grew rebellious of those narrow canyon walls.

To Wolfshead the word had gone that the drive was on, and soon a score of townspeople were making their way up into the foothills to witness the climax of the long winter's work. Cass Mirov came over with Nan, and the two girls stood on a little knoll above the river, watching the timbers racing down toward the mouth of the gorge where men kept the logs moving steadily through that narrow opening.

From long before daylight North had been directing work above the gorge with a crew of picked loggers. Hulking Finns and Danes, most of them, they labored ceaselessly through the morning hours breaking out old skidways from under the ice and snows of winter, opening new log decks for the heavily laden teams. Urging them on with a smile or a word, lending a hand where it was most needed, North kept them at top speed, seeming by his very presence to give these wet and weary men renewed incentive. Even Jean L'Abat found time to shout to Pogue from the top of a skidway, "By Gar, your new foreman he know how to work lak one beeg fool," and he waved toward where North stood, peavy in hand, fighting the great logs that came rolling to the lower decks of the skidway.

Once Nan brought him a cup of coffee.

"How about something hot, Hercules," and North drank it gratefully, but waved her back from the menace of moving logs. Nan laughed.

"I was born with caulks on my toes," she told him, and returned to where Pogue was standing beside Cass.

Pogue wagged a finger at Nan. "It's whispered you're adopting that broad-shouldered gentleman."

Nan shrugged. "For real, genuine gossip-breeding, give me a lumberjack. Every logging camp I ever saw—and that's too many—made a sewing circle seem like a collection of deaf mutes. Sure I like him—who wouldn't?" She looked up challengingly, but Pogue's eyes were staring down the river trail, where a bedraggled figure came running from the gorge. As he drew nearer Pogue recognized one of his crew bosses.

Breathless with haste and the long, slippery climb, the man stumbled to Pogue's side and pointed downstream. "The logs," he cried hoarsely, "the river!"

Stark panic lay in his voice, and with an oath Pogue whirled him around.

"What is it, damn you! Talk!" His own voice shook with the quick contagion of fear as he caught a sense of impending catastrophe within the man's startled eyes.

"The gorge. The logs are jamming." He gasped out the last fateful words with a supreme effort, then staggered back as Pogue's grasp suddenly slackened.

"Jam!" L'Abat had leaped from the skidway, his dark face twisted. "*Sacré nom,* a jam!"

In consternation the two men gazed blankly at one another, the same thought in the minds of each. Once the logs jammed in that narrow mouth of the gorge, thousands of feet of timber would pile up behind, raising a tangled barrier that might take days to break down, log by log. A jam might mean losing the head of flood water, the great carrying force of the river, perhaps the failure of the drive, and it was to avert this very disaster that L'Abat had detailed a crew of experienced "river dogs," to keep the ties and logs moving.

Without another word the two men ran down the narrow trail to the gorge, where at the very edge Pogue stopped, his face white with sudden anger.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Down there, down where the high river banks converged in a funnel-like entrance, three huge fir logs had lodged themselves on a submerged rock. About them the foaming water swirled, while from upstream hundreds of logs and ties were rushing like an advancing army against the newly made barrier. Already caught in the swirl, timbers had piled up like giant match-sticks, and above them, fed by the crews, logs and ties and lodgepole posts were adding to that jumbled mass.

Already three river men, braving the danger of those moving, slippery logs, were working their way out over the spray-drenched ramparts of the jam, prying frantically with peavy and pickaroon to set the interlaced timbers in motion. From downstream others joined them until more than a score were working like things possessed, hurrying back and forth over the ever growing jungle of wood, forcing the weight of their straining bodies against the nearer logs, seeking to raise them —but without success.

One glance Pogue cast at that rapidly growing jam, then beckoned a worker to his side.

"Get to hell over to the Swede Camp. Send down to Wolfshead. I want every man who can handle a canthook up here within two hours."

So through the heartbreaking day the best of Pogue's loggers worked without ceasing, while L'Abat, like some demon incarnate, cursed them on, venturing out upon the face of the

jam where others dared not, chancing death not once but many times as he swung his heavy body between the imprisoned logs, climbing over the face of them, striking the ends with his peavy to test the rigidity of their hold and sometimes in a frenzy of rage pulling at the insensate wood with his bare hands.

One man only went with him upon the very edges of that rumbling, creaking pile. Deliberately, as if no possibility of danger existed, Corrin North climbed about the wavering structure while from the bank two pairs of fearful eyes followed his every step.

Sweat dripped from the men's faces. Every worker was wet with flying spray of that wildly moving river, and twice men slipped from insecure footholds into the water itself, saved only by clutching to the logs until an outstretched hand pulled them back to safety. But the jam hadn't budged.

The sun sank lower, and a young moon cast its faint radiance over forest and river, but all that night men, like bedraggled ants, swarmed about the tangled mass, frantically trying to dislodge the key logs that might release the jam. A hundred lanterns moving, rising, falling, a hundred baffled men working their hearts out. But steadily the jam was gaining. Held back in its course, the water rose, piling the logs higher and higher, until with dawn the vertical face of the jam towered twenty feet above the stream—a frowning wall of intermingled spruce and pine, logs and poles, the white peeled surfaces of countless ties gleaming and wet beneath the gathering light.

At times the whole mass moved slightly, and once, under some sudden tension, a tie snapped and hurtled out into the water. Swift death lay waiting there where North and L'Abat had worked without ceasing, but with the dawn they climbed gloomily up the bank, where the cooks had brought hot breakfast from the nearest camps.

Frowningly North looked at the cloudless sky. "Another day of headwater. What about that giant powder?"

L'Abat pointed to two large wooden boxes that stood on the near-by sled. "That ees all I get."

A silent, hasty meal, then the two went wearily back over that precarious foothold where, along the further bank, they began placing long, slender sticks of dynamite.

Vindictively Jean grinned. "We show her not to fool wit' us,

eh? *Sale cochon!*" And again, as if at some hated living thing, Jean spat and clenched his fist.

Twice they climbed the bank, each time returning with arm loads of the deadly yellow sticks, laying them carefully while Mills threw down the heavily insulated wires that North attached to the charge. Doubtfully Pogue watched every move—his thin face had aged in the night.

"If that don't do it, we're here for two months—and the year's drive will be shot to hell." He glanced at North. "You seem to know something about this sort of thing. Have we done all we can?"

North shrugged. "I've seen jams break up with half the powder we're using now, and I've seen jams that nothing would stir—you had to pick them out log by log. The important thing is if she does start, to keep her moving. Three or four good cant-hook men can do the job, but that means working under the face of the moving jam."

Pogue's face turned paler, and his eye twitched. "I won't send any man on that kind of work and I won't go myself. I've seen three jams go out when men were working under them, and just once the men lived to tell about it."

But Jean, stretching his tired muscles, laughed. "We go out together, eh, Nort'? We show dees," his voice dropped, "dees yellow bellies," and he waved the heavy canthook above his head.

"I'll go too," a quiet voice added, and Mills picked up a peavy.

North shook his head. "It's slippery, dangerous work."

"Sure. It'll be grand experience in case I ever run for Congress." And Corrin made no further objection.

Time to touch off the blast. Carefully Pogue looked about him—on both sides of the stream every man had hurried back to the shelter of the forest—those four alone stood at the rocky entrance to the gorge, and now at a gesture they slipped back.

"Shoot!" Pogue gave the word, and in the same second North closed the switch.

A terrific roar. High above the gorge the sky seemed suddenly crowded with whirling, spinning ties and shattered logs, while the world re-echoed to the din of sound that rolled up the river and into every gulch. From both banks a shout arose—the jam was beginning to move forward, grinding logs and ties

beneath its crushing force. Very slowly it advanced, inch by inch, almost, then for a second it seemed to hesitate, and with a cry North seized a peavy.

"Come on. We've got to keep her moving."

Closely followed by L'Abat and Mills, he slid down the bank and ran out across the logs. There beneath the face of those moving timbers the three men fought, pulling out the logs that had already started, forcing them into the stream, keeping them in motion, frantically digging at the very foundations of the jam. About them the roar of grinding, tumbling timbers dulled the ears, while above, on either bank, the loggers crowded, watching in anxious silence.

A sudden lull. The roar of grinding logs had almost ceased, and stopping from their labor, the three men looked up. That huge structure of entangled logs no longer moved forward, but near the center the face of the jam was beginning to bulge, to lean toward them. Even as their startled eyes rose to that toppling wall it gathered momentum, thrust on by rushing tons of water that spurted from rapidly widening gaps.

Deadly, strangely silent it advanced, and now with a shriek Jean dropped his canthook and made for the nearer shore, North on his heels. A wild scramble over churning logs and up the muddy slope to where Pogue stood—then only they dared stop. Breathless and spent, Jean cast himself on the ground, but North had turned. *Mills was not there!*

Fearfully his eyes searched the further bank, then dropped to the river itself, and a choked cry rose to his wet lips. Down in the stream bed a falling tie had caught Mills a glancing blow across the chest, and bent with pain the ranger lay grasping a log, powerless to move, while towering toward him the jam ground its slow, resistless way.

North whirled just as an outstretched hand closed on his arm.

"Keep back, you fool," Pogue warned, but with a jerk North ripped himself free and threw himself over the edge.

Caught by a back eddy of waters, the log where Mills clung was slowly turning toward the further bank, and racing out over an uncertain foothold of drifting poles and ties, North made his way across the stream.

Logs were tumbling from the head of the jam, and one, striking the water almost at his feet, drenched him, blinding him with spray, but straight out over that ever-writhing footing

North ran at top speed. From log to log he leaped, the caulks of his boots tearing into the rough, wet bark, and now he had raised the bent figure of Mills in his arms, slung him over his shoulder, and faced back toward the shore. Up above him men were shouting, waving, cheering, all unheard amid that pandemonium of falling timbers, and near the bank, shoulder deep in water, Bounce stood barking in a frenzy of desperation.

One step toward safety North took. No more. For in that instant the wall of logs ripped forward just ahead of him, closing his pathway, while behind him, along the farther bank, a moving barricade was beginning to swirl out into the current. He was cut off.

For the briefest second North hesitated. Then, still holding that inert body across his shoulder, he began climbing hand over hand up the very face of the trembling jam. Clutching with aching fingers at each sustaining ledge, finding by some miracle a foothold, he rose little by little above the surface of the water until now he was half way up that wet, precarious wall.

No sound along the river banks now. Like ghosts, like frozen, frightened statues, men and women dotted along the stream's high edge stood watching. Each one powerless to move, every eye fixed on that climbing figure, every nerve straining out to where one man strove single-handed against advancing death.

On the knoll above the canyon Nan had hidden her face in Catherine Mirov's shoulder.

"I can't look—" The voice choked.

"He is still there." The girl's white lips barely moved, her cheeks were bloodless.

Steadily North climbed. Higher now. Almost at the top. With one last effort he reached upward to seize a projecting pole, but as his fingers closed a shiver ran throughout the whole bulging mass, and now, like snow before a furnace blast, that great wall of tangled timbers melted. With a roar that filled the canyon and a splash that rose high as the granite banks, the jam crumbled into a thousand grinding, splintering timbers, racing headlong for the ice-choked gorge.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SLOWLY the curtain of flying spray fell back.

White-faced men thronged to the river's edge, searching for some sign of life down in that swirling whirlpool, Cass among the first. Between its banks, from one rim of the gorge to the other, the river was choked with spruce logs and with ties and poles that jostled and submerged one another or forced on by terrific pressure thrust themselves bolt upright, clear of the water, to whirl and fall back into the stream again. But no sign of North or Mills. Dry-eyed and staring, Cass dared not even hope. It seemed wildly improbable that life could go on down there in that cauldron of lashing waters and grinding logs. Men moved about her, jostled her, but she gave no heed until a shout roused her to see a logger pointing with a shaking finger above the gorge.

Out there beside a great spruce log something black rose for a moment and then was lost again in a swirl of foam. Breathless they gazed, hoping, doubting, despairing. Again that dark object raised, a human head emerged above the surface, and now the rapt watchers saw North throw one leg across a log, pull himself astride it, then drag the wet body of Mills up beside him.

From both banks a cheer echoed above the roar of waters, and men waded waist deep into the stream, seeking to help that figure on the log as it circled slowly amid the maelstrom of moving timbers.

Like one in a nightmare Cass heard a logger cry, "Get a rope to him," then louder, "A rope, quick! Good God, they're drifting to the rapids."

North too saw the nearing menace of those foaming, broken waters, as bobbing and bucking its way down the narrow channel, the log gained speed. Once it collided with a half-submerged timber, and he felt a stinging pain pass through his thigh. Numb with cold, his torn fingers clung to the rough bark, his eyes scanning narrowly the nearer bank in search of aid. Yet curiously he felt no fear—it was as if from some viewpoint utterly detached he was watching this helpless, bedraggled figure being sucked outward toward the new dangers of the flooded canyon. Once the log turned with him, almost throw-

ing him headlong, but he saved himself, and holding Mills free from the current, faced the white waters of the gorge.

Faster now, gathering speed. Then with a roar they were among the rapids. Spray dashed in North's face until he could neither see nor breathe, while like a bucking horse the log plunged, whirling past the first sharp turn, missing by inches a jutting rock, scraping ties and logs in its wild passage, but never quite shaking off that clinging rider. Once the spray cleared, and as through a torn veil North saw the cliffs of the river bank and men running along the trail. Then without warning the log struck a hidden boulder, rose half its length and crashed back, submerging both men in the icy waters before it slowly regained the surface. Another dizzying, racing plunge, another swirl of blinding spray, and almost before North realized, he had emerged into quiet backwaters below the canyon, and lazily as if wearied with its mad pace the log came gently to rest against a clump of willows.

With fumbling, aching fingers North grasped a low-hanging branch and pulled himself to shore. On hands and knees he climbed a little way up the bank, then wearily laid Mills down upon the earth. Water was running from his clothes, his hands were cut and bleeding, but already the man's vitality was asserting itself. Faintly at first he felt the blood tingling to his hands and feet, and raising his head he saw Mills slowly dragging himself to a sitting position. Still half dazed, the ranger looked back toward the river, and a shiver ran through him at the memory of that crumbling jam. With a wince of pain he put both hands to his chest.

North crawled to his side. "It's all right," he said.

And with a twinkle that not even the fury of Wind River could quite subdue, Mills whispered back, "Little old nurse—always on the job."

Already the first of the loggers were pouring down the slope, and at sight of the two men safe on the river bank a great shout went up—a shout that echoed back along the upper trail and out over the river, telling the men across the canyon that North had been found.

But Cass needed no telling. Stockings and dress spattered with mud and snow water, hair streaming wildly behind her, she was among the foremost to reach North's side, and dropping to her knees, the girl whispered, "You're not hurt?"

"Not hurt—just moist."

She tried to smile, but that sudden release from fear had left her weak and powerless. For a moment she trembled throughout her whole body, then hiding her face, gave way to sudden tears. A few minutes later Pogue led her away.

It was a triumphal march back to the Swede Camp that day. In spite of North's protests, the loggers raised him to their shoulders, carrying him, soaked and bark-stained, to where dry clothes and a hot stove restored both him and Mills to the comfort of life again. Someone offered Mills a flask.

The ranger grinned. "That river water sure needs a chaser," and he took a liberal swallow.

Little work was done that afternoon. Secure in the knowledge that the jam had been broken and that flood waters were rushing the ties and logs out to safety, the loggers declared a kind of impromptu holiday. Relieved of the long suspense, they gathered in the big bunk houses to dry their wet clothes, to rest and celebrate the end of another logging year. Even the camp cooks caught the spirit of it and by supper time had laid before the woodsmen a memorable meal.

As for North himself, that one deed had done more to win the good will of the lumber camps than many months of association. It would be a tale long told by many a campfire and in the cabins of forest rangers throughout the Northern Rockies. The day, too, marked a visible change in his relations with Pogue's loggers, and more than ever now they looked to him for leadership.

Even Jean L'Abat, whose only gods were brute strength and brute courage, thumped North on the back. "By Gar, you are one man, Corrin Nort'. Mebbe someday I let you fight wit' me again," and his laughter bellowed through the camp.

But one among them stood apart. Throughout that day Pogue remained at the Swede Camp, silent and thoughtful, and once when North passed him the man's eyes narrowed speculatively.

But luckily for North, perhaps, Pogue and every man in camp found themselves fully occupied for the next few weeks getting out the drive. Busy days. Busy but cheerful days for the logging crews. Fed by melting snows, the head of high water held up through the week, giving the loggers ample time to haul the last of the winter's cut down to the stream banks, and

even before the swollen waters began receding the "tail crews" of rivermen were following the drive beyond the gorge and out through the foothills toward Wolfshead. The fear of jams no longer hung over them. With pickaroons and peavies they kept the last few stragglers moving, pushing out into mid-channel the logs and ties that lay stranded in shallow water, washed up on the banks, or caught in numberless eddies behind the rocks.

The drive was a success. Looking out from their windows in the early morning the people of Wolfshead could see flowing quietly and steadily past the little town that great burden of the winter's cut, urged on by tiny, active figures that followed on either bank, keeping the swift-flowing river at its yearly task.

But with the last days of the drive an unwelcome intruder cast its ominous shadow across the headwaters of Wind River. Brought to the hills by incoming tie-hacks, or early spring wagon trains, or perhaps engendered by the wet and cold of those trying days, the dreaded mountain flu descended without warning upon the camps. It broke out first in the lower Swede Camp, spread rapidly to the river crews and back among the tie cutters' cabins until fully a third of the workers lay in the grip of that malign adversary.

It swept down upon Wolfshead too, and upon the ranches of the lower country, so that for days little was done but to care for the afflicted. Work stood still. The ring of the ax was silenced throughout the woods. No loud warning cry of "Timber," echoed as some forest giant crashed to earth, and loggers' teams stood tethered in their stalls while their masters lay gasping for breath in some near-by cabin.

Day and night throughout it all Doctor Mirov and Cass fought for the lives of this stricken people. Those two were on the trail from early dawn until long after dark.

In the face of the common enemy all factions joined forces. Pogue had turned over two men as assistants to Doctor Mirov, and put at his disposal the best horses in camp. Mills and Guthrie made a long horseback ride to Lander, fighting their way through the last spring blizzard to bring serum back to the camps, while Helen Guthrie turned her home into a makeshift hospital for stricken rangers and lumbermen alike.

Meanwhile beside dim trails back in the forest many a mound was raised, with rough pine slabs at the head, telling of those who would leave the hills no more.

Helen Guthrie and Catherine Mirov—during those desperate weeks the men of Wolfshead had reason to breathe their names with reverence and gratitude. Giving no thought to themselves, they toiled through heartbreaking hours, bringing food and medicines, nursing men back from delirium, closing the eyes of those who could no longer fight.

Then one morning in late April Helen Guthrie lay white-faced and weary, unable to rise, but still Cass went on. Quiet, cheerful, although with eyes a little saddened, she did for those stricken camps what no man could do, bringing with her a vitality and an unfailing courage that heartened even the weariest to fight again. Mills tried to remonstrate with her.

"You'll wear yourself out, girl. You've got to leave some of these things to others. It would be a poor bargain if this gets you down, no matter how many of us old derelicts you pull through."

But the girl only smiled and went on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

With the attack at its height, Buffalo Lakin fell a victim and was barely able to crawl back to his cabin on the edge of the clearing. There Nan left him and ran at top speed through the pines until she found North just below the Swede Camp. Together they hurried back and lifted the old man in bed.

Delirium had seized him and his quavering voice raved of times back in the Indian days. Once North touched his hot hands.

"Better see if Doctor Mirov's reached the Swede Camp yet," he said at last to Nan. "I'll stay here and keep him in bed."

And it was so that Cass and her father found him an hour later. In silence the old physician examined Buffalo's wasted form, then after a time looked up. "These lean ones, they are hard to kill. He has already passed the crisis." The doctor nodded across the bedside at Nan. "There is little to fear, child, but he is old, and it will be days before strength comes back to him."

Cass's arms were around the younger girl, and for a fleeting moment North caught in her eyes the same look of infinite tenderness that took him back to a time he was trying to forget.

His own eyes smarted for a brief second, and he looked away.

Doctor Mirov lighted his pipe. "I watch men," he said reflectively, "with increasing wonder. Today as I ride I saw them back in the forest with ax and saw, swarming over the face of nature like busy insects—and like insects driven by some obscure instinct they know nothing of. Suffering, laboring, tearing down, destroying, ignorant of why they do it or of the end. Ridiculous—and indomitable." He smiled. "And all for —timber. Timber for the markets of the world. Often I amuse myself thinking that these beautiful trees are to Pogue and his men nothing but so many uncollected dollars." The old physician sighed. "It might be a very beautiful world, this, were it not for man. Ah well, the timber has cost many lives this winter." His eyes were fixed on the pines outside. "I sometimes wonder if it is worth the cost."

"Why not?" North was looking at Buffalo's quiet features. "Up here in the logging camps life is unimportant."

"Unimportant, surely. For that matter, Corrin, when you come to my years you will see that life everywhere is unimportant. But it is all we have. Still I am wondering if it is worth this sacrifice of one's youth, this mad laboring without end, this destruction of forests that once were beautiful. And all for what? That one or two men may reap a fortune." He looked curiously at North. "But you, with youth and that great strength of yours—never should you find life unimportant."

North was silent. He felt the eyes of the two women upon him. "Have you ever known what it is to be broke, to be absolutely penniless and hungry and cold?" he asked, almost defiantly. "Have you ever known what it is to see all that you've worked for taken from you overnight? Until you have, there are some things about life you don't know."

Nan took a step forward. "Yes, I've known all those things. I've known what it is to dread the coming of morning—of having to face another day. That was in the East. That's why I came back here." She smiled. "And I haven't found it all roses out here."

Impulsively Cass kissed her. "You know we're all for you, Nan, don't you?"

Through a mist of tears that would not be held back the girl nodded. Her eyes raised to where North stood, and tremulously but with a return of the casual speech that served her as an

armor she asked, "Does that go for you too, big fellow?"

Walking across the cabin, North put both hands on her shoulders. "You're the best friend I've got, Nan. You can count on me always, whatever comes. Don't ever forget that."

"I won't forget," Nan answered, "not ever," and this time the smile was triumphant over the tears.

But at those words and at the look of grateful happiness in Nan's eyes, Cass felt a sudden tightening of the heart.

From that time on, as Buffalo strengthened, North found himself more often up at the old man's cabin with Nan, and the lengthening spring days were more pleasant because of the comradeship between that strangely diverse pair.

Then abruptly as it had come, the epidemic released its grip and within a week the men of Wind River once more took up their normal living, rejoicing in the passing of those evil times.

They had another reason for rejoicing. Summer was coming. The long winter that had held the world in its bitter, glacial grip, the days of blinding blizzards—all this was over. Day by day the sun rose higher over Starlight Pass, and down by the river bank the willows were turning a lighter golden, the aspen twigs were softening with bursting buds, making the valley gay with a brief flowering—the brief flowering that was summer.

Standing on the lower shoulders of the Rockies one might look far out over the mist-filled valley and see men laboring down below the snow line in dotted fields that turned green as the days passed.

Jays and junkos, robins and garrulous bluebirds were venturing up out of the lower country, while over the smaller streams trout flies and midges hovered, mistlike and evanescent, causing many a rainbow trout to leap its full length from out the clear green coolness. Timber wolves and coyotes—they too knew that summer was at hand, and leaving plains and desert edge, came by night back into the hills again in search of deer or elk, weakened by the long winter's abstinence, while far up the granite gorges beyond Starlight Pass, brown bear and cinnamon—even the dreaded grizzly came sleepily from snowbound lairs where they had dozed the dark winter away.

Summer was in the air. It stirred lazily in the breeze that came from off the desert, bringing with it a sense of release and of longing, bringing too that old, immemorial promise that

summer never quite fulfils. There was something heartbreakingly pathetic in the power this brief, blustery springtime possessed to bring happiness to the people of the hills.

The busy days of the drive were long past. The ice had gone from every stream, and Wind River itself moved sedately between its greening banks, forgetful of the wild flood days. Above the gorge fir trees and spruce, lining its banks, gave forth their own benediction of fragrance to the passing winds, and snowshoe rabbits, that Bounce so futilely pursued, were changing their white fur to tans and browns.

So throughout the mountains, from foothills to timberline and on every grassy slope, nature went about her task of brightening the land with the eternal miracle of spring.

Men were busy too. All day long from down the road that stretched out into the desert came winding wagon trains, carrying supplies into the mountain country, while back in the forests tie-cutters and swampers, ax-men and sawyers were reaching further and further into the dark, uncut stretches of the virgin woods, building shacks, brushing out roads, making ready to start the cutting for another year's drive.

And all this meant work for the rangers. Every tree selected for cutting had first to be marked with the Forest Service blaze, sled roads must be surveyed, sale boundaries marked. Already the Swede Camp swarmed with tie-cutters just in from the outside world, and Guthrie's wires for help to keep pace with them were more urgent—but unavailing. Always came the news from Denver that no one could be spared. A bad fire season threatened the National Forests in southern Colorado, and every ranger had been sent there—Guthrie and his handful of overworked men must get along as best they could.

None realized better than Guthrie himself that all this was playing into Pogue's hands, but the grizzled forester, saying nothing, drove his rangers with a grim intensity that told beyond all need for words how well he knew his back was to the wall.

Pogue, meanwhile, began pushing his advantage. On Sheridan Creek his men had been forced to wait five days before the rangers marked the timber. Later Mills found it necessary to order the brush piling crews to go back and rectify some careless work. All these things Pogue was careful to report. Complaints began pouring in to Congressmen at Washington

that the Forest Service was seriously holding up the corporation's work. The stories magnified. The company was forced to lay off men for days at a time until the rangers got around to marking the timber. Queries came from all over the state, and talk of Congressional investigations hovered in the air while from the Washington Office of the Forest Service a long memorandum arrived asking why Guthrie's administration was not satisfactory. The newspapers of the state, eager for a sensational story and adroitly led by Pogue's associates, played up the tale and now began openly to attack the Forest Service.

Killing work, but the Supervisor, uncomplaining and unheeding, pushed on in the face of it all, and when Mills in an outburst of impatience advised him to tell both the Forest Service and the North Continental to go to hell, he only shrugged his broad, unbending shoulders.

"Why should I quit?" he asked. "These things come and go. The old Forest Service is here to stay, and I'm part of it. I've lived through twenty-five years of political yelping, and it never changes. Always it's 'we don't know our job,' 'we're locking up the forests and holding up progress.'" His face grew serious. "Maybe this time they'll get me—but I'm aiming to carry on for a while yet. I've seen three generations of politicians wave their arms and spew their speeches in Congress, and I'm still here."

But Pogue, too, was still there. He, too, was waiting, and as the hot chinooks of mid-summer dried the forest until duff and needles were like tinder Pogue was well content, knowing that here lay a weapon which if wisely used could break down the crumbling defenses of the forest men. A dangerous weapon, though—not to be used unguardedly—and for a long time Pogue brooded over the best way to begin and the men best able to serve him.

His first thought had been to give the task to Corrin North, but increasing suspicions made Pogue reluctant to take him that far into his confidence. Too much had happened. The mysterious killing of Larsen, the saving of Mills—Pogue had never forgiven that. North's silence about his past, the unpalatable knowledge that Cass had once known him. All these things conspired to keep Pogue from feeling wholly secure with this man who spoke so little, who seemed at times to be directing his attention not at what Pogue was saying, but at what might lie behind the words.

So at last it was not to North that he went with his new-laid plans, but to the henchman he could always be sure of—to Jean L'Abat, the man who, in Pogue's own estimate, was "a perfect combination for his job—a strong body and a slow mind."

Those two sat together in the office of the commissary one night in late July, and as L'Abat listened to his master's carefully spoken words his eyes took on the look of a hunting animal that at last has sighted prey. More than once he nodded, and his thick lips parted in an admiring grin. At the end he rose.

"*Sapristi,* do I not always say yours are the brains of one very devil?"

Again the two men smiled. "Get a couple of the boys to help you," Pogue cautioned as Jean turned to leave, "then if something goes wrong it won't be one of us who'll have to pay for the mess."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CLOUDLESS days followed, while the winds blew in from the Painted Desert, and the first fruits of that conversation soon made themselves apparent. Early one morning Mills' phone aroused him just as the sun touched the ridge above Starlight Pass, and sleepily the ranger heard the voice of a fire lookout on Pinnacle Butte.

"There's smoke boiling up at the head of Sheridan Creek," came the message. "From the color I'd say it was burning in dead timber." Rapidly the lookout gave Mills the mapped location, and ten minutes later, without breakfast for himself or his horses, the ranger was in the saddle and hurrying up the narrow trail.

Gaining a broad bench that overlooked the surrounding country, Mills saw a thin trickle of smoke rising straight up on the motionless morning air, and looking at his map he nodded. It would be not far from the trail itself and almost in the center of an old burn. Bad place for a fire—thousands of acres of charred, dead forest, a tangled mass of down timber and dry snags. A place difficult to get about in, and with growing anxiety Mills kicked his horse to a trot.

At the first fire-tool box along the trail he broke the seal, took

out an ax and cross-cut saw, and hurried on. He rounded the last turn at a fast trot, then reined in, and for the first time that morning breathed easier. Just ahead a dead spruce snag was burning. It must have smoldered for hours, and now, fanned by the first morning breeze, was beginning to throw flames high up into its dry, twisted branches. Another hour of freshening wind, and those flaming brands might have wrought swift havoc among the gray expanse of dead trees and fallen timber that like a graveyard of whitening snags, stretched across the country until they met the green edges of living forest.

Dropping his reins, Mills slid from the horse. A few strokes of the ax brought the tree crashing to the ground, and soon he had heaped dirt about the burning wood, smothering it into extinction.

The danger was over—the problem it presented remained, and Mills seated himself on a near-by stump, the fine lines about his eyes puckered in thought. Just how had that fire started? It was still too early in the season for lightning storms and few people passed this way. Yet the fire had begun some time the day before, and examining the trail, Mills made out a faint, indistinct imprint that resembled neither footprint nor the track of any animal. For a hundred yards he searched along the trail, but found nothing, and at last picking up his ax, he went back, still puzzled, to the ranger station. That night as Mills made out his fire report, he hesitated for a long time, and at last printed carefully on the bottom of the card, *ORIGIN UNKNOWN.*

Next day three fires broke out less than a quarter of a mile apart on the further side of Wind River. Two lookouts had discovered them almost at the same moment, and Guthrie sent a crew of ten men, with Mills and another ranger to take charge.

This time the flames were not so easily subdued. Throughout the long, hot day they fought with shovel, ax and saw, and by midnight managed to get a fire-line about the last of them. The crews worked until dawn, cutting whatever trees threatened to fall across the line, and by morning all danger was past.

The damage was negligible, but precious hours had been lost—hours that the forest force sorely needed to keep abreast of the ever-mounting work. And about these fires there too was the same puzzling absence of tracks, although Mills hunted diligently in the dry ground. No signs gave any clue to their

origin. Weary and not without foreboding, the rangers came down the mountainside for food and rest.

And it was on that same night Mills made a secret visit to Corrin North's cabin. With pencil and dividers North was tracing a system of sled roads on a map when he heard the ranger's knock, and dimming the lantern so that no late passerby would see the light, he looked with a little smile of comprehension down into Mills' perturbed face.

"You've come to talk about forest fires."

Mills grunted surprised assent. "As a plain and fancy mind-reader you win the gold-plated oil stove. What do you know?"

"Let me ask a question first. What do you suspect?"

Wearily the ranger slumped into a chair. "Corrin, those fires didn't come from lightning. There aren't any logging operations going on in that country, and it's still too early for tourists. The hunting season hasn't started, and fishermen don't go up on top of mountains to fish. What's the answer? *Those fires were set.*"

"Any tracks?"

"I haven't been able to find a single sign."

"You wouldn't."

"Why not? A man has to make a mark in the ground every once in a while when he goes through the woods. Those fires didn't drop from airplanes."

North's eyes were fixed in meditation, and when again he spoke it was to take up a new thought. "A chinook has been blowing out of the south all day, Harry, and the upper country is dry as this firewood."

"Well, what's that prove?"

"It means that even as we talk here the stage is being set for more trouble. With that wind blowing it won't take much for a fire to jump into the tops and start a crown fire that nothing on earth can stop. I'd like to make a prophecy that by early tomorrow morning a lookout will be phoning you the location of some new smokes."

"But good God, are they going to keep that up all summer?"

"Why not? Can you think of a better way to wear you rangers down?" North rose. "Better not stay here any longer, Harry. They're getting more and more uncertain about me. Best thing for both of us is to turn in and catch a little sleep. I'll see you at your station by dawn."

And it was still faintly light when North, avoiding the main trail, cut across country over the wooded hillside to Mills' station. The ranger received him with a cup of hot coffee.

"No calls from any lookout yet, Jeremiah, old boy," Mills announced jubilantly.

The phone rang as he spoke. In frowning silence he took the message, then hung up the receiver, and swearing softly, turned toward North.

"You win—I crowed too soon. Lava Mountain lookout says he can sight five fires up where we've never had trouble in years. And the lightning season still ahead of us. Wait until I ring up Pinnacle Butte and see what good news he's got."

But the lookout of Pinnacle Butte wasn't there. Plied with bad whiskey, he lay snoring in a logger's cabin two miles down Sheridan Creek.

North was already at the door. "You'll need all the men you can get together to fight those fires, Harry. I'm going up now. I want to take a look around before your men ruin all chance of finding tracks—if there are any tracks."

Two hours later, with a crew of twenty men, Mills located the first fire near the top of an aspen covered ridge, and fell to work cutting a line through the dense brush, but they had been there only a few moments when North sauntered toward them and beckoning to Mills, turned back up the slope.

He said no word as the ranger fell into step behind him, but followed the trail to the nearest point of the fire. There he stopped and looked inquiringly down.

"Well, what do you make of it?"

Dubiously Mills examined the ground. The fire must have started within ten feet of the trail, and backed by a light wind, spread fanwise into a cluster of young growth. There, gaining strength, it had licked its way up into the branches, and leaping from tree to tree, was rapidly climbing the slope beyond.

Up and down the trail Mills' eyes roved, but although the earth was fairly soft and undisturbed, he could find no sign of either human footprint or horse track. In final perplexity he shook his head.

"Can't make anything out of it."

North leaned down. "Look here."

From beneath an aspen leaf, just where the fire had begun, he picked up the charred remnants of a dozen matches lying

in a little pile. Wonderingly Mills touched them, but his eyes were puzzled as before.

"It doesn't take all those matches to start a fire."

"It might if you were on horseback and wanted to make sure. Come here."

Once more North led the way along the trail, and within fifty feet pointed down. There, in a patch no larger than a man's hand the pine needles had been freshly burned and in the center of that tiny burn lay a bundle of blackened matches tied together by a piece of twine.

"You see what's happened," North was saying. "Your man never even dismounted, so you'll find no footprints. He lighted these bundles of matches and threw them back into the brush. There's another bundle below here, and I think if you look carefully in the undergrowth you'll find more. Your incendiary gentleman rode along, lighting matches, and kept going."

But Mills' eyes were still scanning the trail. "Are you trying to tell me a horse went by here yesterday? How come no signs? How does he cover his tracks?"

"Easily enough. He made use of the old rustlers' trick. What would you call this?" Both men bent over a large indentation in the trail. It was roughly round and indistinct, and after a long minute's silence Mills shook his head. "That's no horse's track. But what the Hell is it?"

"Just what you said—a horse's track." North laughed outright at the other's bewilderment. "Harry, that horse happened to have his hoofs bound up in burlap. Look close where the dirt is softest—you can even make out the mark of the texture."

North glanced about him. "I can't stay too long here, but my advice is that you go back along this trail. Sooner or later you'll come to a place where those marks mysteriously disappear. That's where your man put on the burlap covers. Beyond that there may be tracks you will find easier to follow, and unless I'm badly mistaken, those tracks belong to the saddlehorse of a dear friend of yours." With a nod the tall figure disappeared down the trail.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MILLS' FEARS were well founded—the fires on Sheridan Creek were just a beginning. All through that short, windy

summer the valley of Wind River was never free from the blue haze of smoke that floated down out of the hills, telling the people of Wolfshead that somewhere up there the forests were burning. And behind that smoke pall a small handful of forest men, crippled in number and dog-tired from self-enforced labor, were fighting to prevent what every ranger fears above all else—a crown fire. The northern Rockies had known them before and remembered them with dread—vast conflagrations defying all man's efforts, raging over the land, burning millions of feet of timber to gray ashes, turning thousands of acres of green forests into a graveyard of charred and bleaching snags. Ranch houses, fields of ripe grain, often whole herds of cattle had fallen victim to the flames in those evil and unforgotten days.

So far, through good fortune and dogged, backbreaking defense, the rangers had held every fire within close bounds. Not one of them had got away to do great damage, but they were fatally hampering the foresters' work. Slowly but very surely this never-ending fight against fire after fire was breaking down their morale. There was no hope now of keeping ahead of the tie and timber cutters, and at last against his will Guthrie was forced to order Pogue to discontinue cutting until he could send rangers to mark more trees.

Pogue promptly made the most of the situation. At last he had all the instances he needed to show that the timber sale was being interfered with and that unless more trees were marked the winter cutting would come to a standstill.

"Bureaucratic and obsolete methods are forcing us out of business," he wired to his influential directors, who lost no time in presenting their complaints before sympathetic political circles at Cheyenne and Washington. The newspapers echoed the charge of incompetency. "The Forest Service cannot even protect its own property from fires. The people are losing thousands of dollars' worth of valuable timber." There was a suspicious unanimity in their charges, but it all had its effect. An investigation was becoming a certainty.

And as day followed day that haze of smoke thickened until the fire lookouts in their high towers were powerless to pierce the blue blanket that hovered over all the country from Starlight Pass out to the Painted Desert. The eyes of the forest—the lookouts—were blinded by the smoke, but the fires went

on. One of Pogue's loggers—a half-breed—was caught near a fire, his pockets stuffed with matches, and his footprints were identified leading directly to the burned area. The evidence went no further, and Pogue immediately discharged the man. Later he was given work at increased wages in another of the company's camps. But still the fires went on.

Week by week the blazing suns of July and August were drying up the parched grasses. The thick ground cover of pine needles was like tinder. The whole region had become a gigantic match-box. A hot desert wind now and a lightning storm might be all that it needed to sweep fire and destruction across the valley from timberline to timberline.

Meanwhile, worn out and filled with foreboding, Guthrie and his rangers rode the mountain trails.

"I'd give a year's pay for an early snow," the Supervisor said once as he paused for a smoke at Mills' station. "If we just hold out until the September storms we may pull through."

"Not if Pogue and his gang can help it."

Guthrie nodded. "Did I tell you his latest play? He's got the Cheyenne newspapers demanding that we turn the forests over to the state where they'll be properly taken care of. It's a popular lead with the politicians, and they're eating out of his hand." Guthrie rose and shrugged his broad shoulders. "All in the day's work. God knows if it hadn't been for you and the rest of the boys we'd have broken down completely. I wired yesterday for more help, but they tell me I must get along as best I can. Colorado's having the worst fire season in years, and Congress is on another debauch of economy. Well, we'll see it through somehow." Wearily he climbed into the saddle.

For a long time Mills watched the erect, unbeaten figure that gave no sign of the burden carried almost unaided against the overwhelming odds of money, organized rascality and political power. And Mills too wondered when the first snows might come and bring this long torture to an end.

But Pogue was boring from within. Among the forest crews battling those fires were "wobblies,"—men either covertly placed there by Pogue, or men paid by him to spread dissension and distrust into the fire camps themselves, to make the fighters hostile toward the rangers, to slow up the work. Already there had been open mutiny in two of the fire camps, and Mills suspected that among the fire crews themselves men were

actually spreading new conflagrations while pretending to guard the fire line.

An intolerable situation. There was no place one might look for aid, and despite the best efforts of the rangers, despite the dogged, heroic fight Guthrie himself was making, the forest forces were losing ground.

It was an active summer for the Mirovs, too. Lumbering and fire-fighting had brought into the logging woods men from the gold-fields and ranches, and their additional number placed a heavy burden on Doctor Mirov—a burden only Cass was able to help him shoulder.

The slender, black-haired figure mounted on the little sorrel mare was a familiar sight throughout the trails above Wolfshead. Sometimes on those long rides through the forest Helen Guthrie went with her, and it was on one such trip they stopped on the first ridge of the foothills to rest. A day in late August was just ending, and in silence they sat their horses, looking out over the peaceful river valley. For the better part of an hour they had ridden without a word when unexpectedly the older woman broke the silence.

"Days like this—they make up for all the months of winter. If only they weren't so few. Look—" She pointed to a patch of sunlight where a few daisies dotted a blue carpet of forget-me-nots. "Autumn and summer flowers blooming together—as if they must hurry—as if time were so short for them."

"Time is so short for all of us," Cass answered, "too short to waste." Something of regret and of rebellion lay in the girl's voice, and Helen asked quickly, "Aren't you doing too much, Cass? Let's ride over to Harry Mills' and I'll cook you both a good supper."

But Cass shook her head. "Not today. I promised to spend the night at Nan Lakin's after I get through at the Swede Camp."

"I saw Nan yesterday down in Wolfshead. It's remarkable how that long-legged youngster is developing into an attractive girl. I suppose she'll always talk like a cross between a cow-puncher and a Broadway policeman, but there's a new beauty about her of late, a quiet happiness." She stopped, and her eyes grew speculative. Carelessly she added, "I wonder if Corrin North might not be partly responsible for that new look. He himself has changed."

Cass did not turn her head. Her eyes were still fixed out over the lower country. "How has he changed?"

"Oh, come now, surely you've seen. Why when he first came here ten months ago he was like a wild thing, distant and taciturn—a lone wolf sort of person. Jack tells me that since the log jam Corrin North is the real leader up in the camps—more than Jean L'Abat himself. Who knows, perhaps in time he'll even learn how to be a social animal." She stopped for a moment, and a note of perplexity sounded in her voice. "Strange—Jack is certain that he has seen Corrin before, but you can't get him to talk. Where was it you met him, dear?"

"In New Mexico. Down at the company's main camp."

"What was he doing there?"

"I never really knew. It was as if he avoided questions about himself and his work, and I only knew he spent his days back in the forest."

"Did Bert know him too?"

"No. They never saw each other until last winter."

"Then I wonder—" Helen Guthrie stopped.

"You wonder what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Please. Don't be mysterious."

"Well, I was wondering why the two men should—after all, they do seem to be natural enemies, don't they?"

"I don't know. You must remember Bert gave him his chance to make good up here." There was a hesitating, indecisive quality in the girl's voice, and comprehendingly Helen Guthrie nodded.

For a time they rode in single file, and minutes later Cass raised her head to ask, "Do you think—were you really in earnest about Corrin and Nan Lakin?"

Helen laughed. "I've always been the light-hearted kind of person who puts two and two together and makes six, but there's no denying that Corrin North is a changed man from the solitary stranger who came here last Thanksgiving eve. I remember seeing him that day after the fight. He couldn't smile then. His eyes were haunted. He's different now."

Again silence, and again the quiet, almost tremulous voice, "It isn't always so easy to smile—not always."

Helen leaned forward and with her own hand touched the small gauntleted hand of the girl. "Aren't you happy, dear?"

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cass's clear, searching eyes were raised, and reining in her horse to a dead stop she asked, "What does Jack Guthrie really think of Bert?"

It was Helen's turn to be at a loss for reply. She hesitated. "Of course, they're on different sides of the fence——"

Impatiently Cass shook her head. "No, please, Helen. Why can't you at least be honest with me?" Her hand clenched about the saddle-horn. "No one dares to be honest. It's as if you all knew something or suspected something terribly wrong about Bert. Yet with me and with Father he's been the kindest of men. Without Bert's help Father might have had a difficult time."

"Is that why you're going to marry him—out of gratitude?"

"No-o. I admire him, of course. He's been wonderful to us always, and then—well, there *is* such a thing as duty."

"I wonder, dear, if you don't think too much of duty."

"Shouldn't I?"

"Not when duty opposes itself to love. Perhaps there's such a thing, Cass, as being too loyal. And I suspect there's always a glamor in being singled out by the big man of the country."

"You think I'm influenced by that?"

"You'd be more than human if you weren't, Cass."

And now they hurried up the trail to the Swede Camp where, her mission finished, Cass took leave of Helen and turned on alone toward the canyon where Buffalo Lakin's cabin lay.

It was one of those rarely precious days when nature, as if in a mood of brief contrition, seeks to atone for the long dreary winter behind and the cold wet days of autumn just ahead. In that quiet hour all the world seemed to pause regretful that this golden afternoon must pass, and even the squirrels, forgetting for the moment their hurried search for winter's food, sat up by the trail to watch the rider pass, while upon the still air trembled the thin humming of a thousand insects hovering in the sunlight throughout their one short day of living.

Slowly she rode through that cloudless August afternoon, letting her mare saunter along the trail as if both horse and rider were reluctant to end the spell. Sunlight flecked her, touching her hair, and a south wind moved idly among the

pine tops while slowly she swayed back and forth to the movement of the horse. She may have been day dreaming, for once a smile touched her lips, and after a time her breast rose in what might have been a sigh. Then before she realized, the sun had drifted behind the pass and the chill of mountain night crept into the air. Surprised, Cass touched her mare to a trot, but it was almost dusk when she entered the canyon and rode up into the little clearing surrounding Lakin's cabin.

In answer to her shout Nan ran to the doorway.

"You're sure the late and fashionable visitor," Nan called. "Supper'll soon be ready. Show that cayuse of yours to the barn and I'll run down later with a feed bag. It's swell to see you."

A few minutes later Buffalo hobbled into the cabin. The old man looked tired and harassed, his thin, straggling hairs wet with perspiration, and Nan pushed him gently into a chair.

"Every man working on this timber sale aims to be his own little Ajax," she scolded. "From Bert Pogue on down each one thinks if he don't do two men's work the whole logging racket will blow up. And the rangers are just as bed. Seems to me, though, I've heard these forests have been here a good many centuries. Most men are loco."

Cass laughed. "Nan, I'm afraid you're growing up. It's a fatal sign when you begin to suspect that men are queer creatures."

"Oh, I've been learning that for years. Don't forget I put in two years slinging hash over at a food joint in Brooklyn. What I didn't learn about men! It was good to get back here among the chipmunks and bluejays—although as steady companions they're not so hot either. Come on, let's eat."

"What made you decide to leave your cabin at the Swede Camp and come down here?" Cass asked as they sat around the dimly lit table.

"Better pasture for the team. Besides, it's nearer to where they're building roads for the new skidways. So we moved in last week. Felt funny at first, living in the bottom of a canyon, and it's a plum' unfamiliar country for me on this side of the creek."

"I know it almost as well as our front yard," Cass answered. "I camped up here for three summers with Helen Guthrie. Horseback and afoot we explored every inch of these hills as far as Lava Mountain and fished every hole in Sheridan Creek.

Harry Mills used to say the trout were so hungry up here you had to hide behind a tree to bait your hook." Her eyes were on the lamp, thoughtfully. "Wonderful summers! It was a wild paradise, this country. No timber cutters, no trails. I often wish they would keep out of this particular spot. There must be plenty of timber elsewhere."

"Might speak to Bert Pogue about it," Nan smiled. "He'd do anything for you, wouldn't he?"

But Cass's eyes remained thoughtful. "I'm not so sure. I sometimes think the work he's doing is much more important to him than I am. Maybe that's as it should be."

Then after a long moment's silence she asked, with elaborate carelessness, "Have you seen Corrin North?"

To her surprise, Nan laughed outright. "I could have bet seven dollars that was coming."

Cass flushed. "Why?"

"Oh, just call it a hunch," and again the girl smiled provokingly across the table. "Yes, I saw him the other day—him and that crazy pup of his. I was coming up the trail and ahead of me a Finn driver was beating his horse with a roughlock. He had a heavy load of ties and the horse couldn't make it through a mud hole, so the Finn was cussing like a tourist flapper and bearing down on that roughlock until he'd drawn blood. Just then North comes down the trail and I hear him say to the driver, 'Lay off that stuff. Throw down some of those ties and I'll help you get across.' But the Finn's mad clear through and and he tells North where to head in. Then he takes one more swipe at the horse——"

Nan stopped and deliberately buttered a piece of bread.

"Then?" Cass was leaning forward eagerly.

A reminiscent smile spread over Nan's face. "I suppose you couldn't hurry that North person if the world was exploding under his feet. He just slowly reached up, lifts the Finn off his team, and tosses him about fifteen feet back in the brush. That took all the breath and most of the sand out of him, and he helped North unload the ties. After that they got across the mud hole easy enough. When they'd finished loading up North hands the Finn his roughlock. 'Don't let me ever see you beating a horse with that again,' he says, 'or I'll wrap it around your neck.' " For a moment the girl was silent. "It would be a lot better world if there were more men like Corrin North in it."

Cass made no answer.

After dinner Cass talked for a time with Buffalo, but the old man seemed more than usually depressed, and at last she went to the little lean-to beside the cabin that Nan, with conscious irony, called the "guest room."

"Ring if you want anything," Nan told her, "and if the boarders get noisy, phone the house detective. We'll be having breakfast about six." Lighting the lamp, she left the room.

Musingly Cass undressed, pausing more than once to listen to the quiet sounds of the night, the call of innumerable frogs down Sheridan Creek and the sleepy twittering of a bird in the fir beyond, while within the room the night wind bore its warm, sensuous smell of the midsummer Rockies.

All about her life was pulsing, throbbing, and conscious of its troubling magic she sat there on the narrow cot, slender legs curled up beneath her, a sense of rebellion stirring within her heart. She lighted a cigarette, but it tasted flat, and she crushed it on the board floor. At last she unrolled her stockings and stretched out upon the blankets.

In utter quietness she lay there, watching through the open window the moonlight touching to silver the topmost branches of the firs. Inch by inch the black shadows of the trees retreated, the frogs ceased their calling, but wide-eyed and sleepless Cass lay thinking of another night just such as this, a night in summer scarcely one year ago. Words she tried to forget came flooding back to her, and the memory of arms that tightened about her. She turned, and the pillow beneath her cheek was wet. Not until hours later did she close her eyes.

It was broad daylight when she awoke to a vague feeling of disquiet, and sitting bolt upright in bed, looked out the window. Across the clearing the fringe of fir trees was obscured with blue, drifting smoke, and an acrid smell of burning wood came hot and heavy to her nostrils. She listened. The wind was moving uneasily through the tree tops, evoking an incessant whispering, and once she heard a far-off, hollow roar.

*Forest fire!* The dreaded words chilled the blood from her heart, and throwing back the covers she threw on her clothes and ran outside.

The wind had changed in the night. Driven before a rising gale, gray clouds of smoke were rolling up from the lower country, and now—there was no mistaking this time—she

heard the nearing crackle of flames. Beyond the clearing the trees were waving with the draft of it, and against the dull, murky sky Cass saw a red glow as of an approaching wall of fire. Frantically she ran back to the cabin, arousing the two sleepers with her calls, and a moment later Nan emerged, pulling a pair of overalls over her riding boots. One glance behind, and without a word the two girls raced to the barn where they saddled Cass's horse. Dense smoke was pouring across the park as they led the animal back to the cabin, and affrighted by the approaching flames the mare reared back on the reins and plunged, but a word from Cass quieted her.

Old Buffalo had already left the cabin and was hobbling painfully down the path when Cass reached his side.

"We can walk faster than you," she said. "You ride. Nan and I will follow." And as the old man still hesitated, she added impatiently, "There's no time to argue. In ten minutes that fire will be on us."

As if to confirm her words, a whirling gust tossed high in the sky a shower of flaming sparks that floated, almost to the edge of the clearing, bringing the first hot breath of fire.

"Come, get on!" Cass's voice was sharp with anxiety, and seizing the near stirrup, Buffalo clambered stiffly into the saddle. Once there, he reached down for the reins.

But as he raised his head, a blaze of light swept the northern sky and a solid sheet of flame leaped to the wooded summits of the hills beyond, outlining against that racing wall of destruction the waving tops of a thousand giant spruce, doomed irrevocably to the flames. Shuddering, Buffalo looked down at the girls.

"We're cut off. It's gone around us to the north." Like a trapped animal he sat peering at the advancing sheet of fire. "God," he murmured brokenly.

But Cass had seized the reins and was turning the mare down the slope toward Sheridan Creek.

"Keep ahead," she called, "ahead toward the creek."

Both Nan and Buffalo looked hopelessly at her. "You can't get through in that direction," Nan protested. "There's a high wall of rock beyond the creek. We'd be caught like rats."

But Cass was beyond explaining. "We haven't time to talk. I tell you I know this country. Follow me."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Without waiting for reply she made off at right angles to the approaching fire, and after a second's hesitation, Nan hurried close behind her. But as the old man jerked the reins to follow, the mare, terrified at the roar of the oncoming flames, or rebellious at the unfamiliar touch of a stranger, reared back on her hind legs, and turning in the air, bucked twice.

Caught unaware, Buffalo groped wildly for the saddle-horn, lost his balance, and fell heavily among the pine needles while the mare, free now from all restraint, whirled up the trail with a clatter of pounding hoofs and disappeared behind the smoke pall.

In a second the two girls were kneeling at Lakin's side, and supported by their strong arms, he half rose, as if in a daze, then shook his head feebly. Desperately Nan looked up.

"Go ahead, Cass. You can't do any good here. We'll make it somehow. Don't stay with us."

But Cass, with both arms beneath the old man's head, was gently shaking him from side to side.

"Try to get up," she urged, her low voice resonant with the quickened sense of danger. "You must get up. We'll help you. Come—you can make it."

Slowly in response to her insistence Buffalo struggled to his feet, and now they led him slowly out of the clearing toward the slope the stretched down through the forest into Sheridan Creek.

Just as they entered the timber, Cass cast one last anxious look behind. It would be a close race. Already brands and burning bark were falling about the shack, and on the further edge of the clearing the dry grass had begun to crackle—certain forerunners of the nearing sheet of fire.

But she only said, "A little faster," and with redoubled effort the two girls helped the old man on. Once he stumbled to his knees and for a tortured second all hope left Cass's heart, but doggedly he pulled himself to his feet again, and in another moment they were scrambling down the moss covered banks of the creek. On the very edge Cass paused, looked about her, as if at a loss, then led the way upstream while ever louder from behind them came the deepening roar of fire.

Buffalo heard that dominant rolling as of a thousand distant drums that seemed to fill the very sky.

"She's jumped into the tops," he muttered. "Even a man on horseback couldn't run it out now."

Cass made no answer. She too knew the deadly meaning of the crown fire—the fire that leaps from tree top to tree top, sweeping destruction in its roaring path, the fire all living things must flee or perish. The disaster long dreaded by the rangers had come at last.

They hurried on. It was perpetual twilight here beneath the interlaced branches of fir and spruce, and Cass peered anxiously ahead through low drifting smoke, then almost at once saw what she had been seeking. Up there, up on the nearer side of the Creek, a huge bowlder jutted out, extending half way to the other bank, and with a cry of relief Cass waded waist deep into the stream.

Wonderingly the two plunged after her, feeling their way along the granite face of the rock, and rounding a sharp turn, they saw that she had led them into a kind of enclosure, a semi-cave within the stream itself. Above them a narrow slit revealed the smoke-laden sky, and far back in the dim obscurity, Cass stood beckoning, knee deep in the cold waters.

"If we keep our faces close to the surface, I think we can let the fire go over us. These rocks are thick. They'll never heat up. If only the smoke doesn't choke us," she added.

For the old man had given way to a fit of coughing until he leaned weak and spent on the shoulder of the girl.

"How did you find this?" Nan whispered.

"We used to come here to swim—Helen and I—years ago." She looked at the narrow ribbon of reddening sky above and at the cliffs that rose, turret-like, across the stream.

"If only the smoke stays up," she said, more to herself than to the girl.

Nan nodded. "We'll know soon enough."

She was right. Almost at once the first wall of flame was on them. With a roar, with a savage crash of angry flames, the heavens had turned from lurid brown to a blaze of yellow light, and across the creek the air was filled with thousands on thousands of burning brands, floating down like a glittering shower of fire from the blazing sky. They fell with a soft, unceasing hiss into the water, or thudded upon the stream bank, while the

wind with ever increasing violence whirled out over the surface of the creek to howl its way up through the fir trees on the farther slope.

A world of flame. A world of swirling smoke and wind-lashed waters. From up the creek a startled deer paused in full flight, a spotted faun cowering at its side. Blinded and crazed with terror, they leaped the stream and ran straight into that hell of flame. With a little shudder Cass raised both hands to her eyes.

Wave after wave of heat surged over them. Protected as they were by sturdy walls of granite, it soon grew stifling within that narrow space, and now all three were crouching above the cold waters, keeping their faces close to the surface, where the air was most free from smoke.

Nan watched Buffalo anxiously. Haggard and with reddened eyes he leaned forward, panting like a dog, but sensing her fear, he only shook his head.

"I'll be all right," he gasped.

It grew darker. Blue-gray clouds of smoke rolled in upon them, blinding them with its stinging presence, gripping their lungs, and from time to time Cass raised a handful of water to Buffalo's mouth to release that growing tension in his throat. Beneath the strain the old man's eyes had closed, and with both arms Cass supported him, holding his face just above the water. She could feel the chill touch of his skin on her hands.

Slowly an hour, two hours dragged by. The roar of fire was passing to the north, but still against the cliff across the creek they could catch the reflection of blazing trees and hear the soft hiss of flaming fragments falling into the water. Beneath the waist both girls were numb. All feeling had left them, and once in desperation Nan started to leave the shelter of the cave, but Cass held her back.

"Not yet," she warned. "Wait a little. I think the smoke's clearing."

Watching, waiting, they crouched back in silence. Then—it seemed hours later—Cass heard a faint scratching from above, and looking up, saw silhouetted against the sky a shaggy, wolf-like animal gazing at them. She stared, then with a glad cry called to Nan.

"It's Bounce!"

She shouted twice, but already the dog had disappeared, and

a moment later they heard him barking in the distance. Louder and nearer the bark came, and now North's head loomed against the sky as shading his eyes, he tried to pierce the dim obscurity of that rocky cavern. But before he could see them, Nan called, "Corrin, we're down here. We're safe."

"Is Cass there?" The note of anxiety was unmistakable, and even through her numb body Cass felt a thrill.

"Yes, I'm here." She wondered at the sudden weakness of her voice.

"Thank God! Wait where you are, all of you."

Scrambling down the face of the rock, he came wading toward them through the shallow waters. Nan gasped at the sight of him. Hatless, clothes torn, his face was streaked with soot and sweat, his eyes reddened and half closed by the smoke.

"Thank God!" he said again, and reaching forward, touched Cass as if to make sure of her presence. For a long, tremulous moment he said no more, then, "You can come out now. The forests are hot underfoot, but we'll go up on the bank. It's still dangerous back in the timber. Trees have been falling all morning." He looked into Buffalo's face, then picked the old man up and followed by the two girls carried him outside.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Numb, cold and shivering, Cass and Nan sought out the first sunny spot on the bank. Audibly Nan's teeth chattered.

"Talk about cold storage," she said, then closing her eyes, lay back and her whole body trembled from head to foot.

North's eyes raised to Cass but she shook her head. "I'll be all right soon."

He took Nan's hands in his and chafed her wrists until the first faint flush of blood began returning to her blue lips.

"That's better," he smiled.

Feebly old Buffalo opened his eyes and sat looking back at the smoke-filled forest. "Did the fire do much damage?" his old voice quavered.

"A clean sweep. It started yesterday. The rangers got a line around it by midnight, and everything seemed safe until the wind shifted. A gale sprang up behind it, the fire whipped through the canyon, jumped into the tops and ran like a race

horse across the valley. If the wind rises again this afternoon it'll burn its way to timberline. The boys from the lower camp got out just in time. They lost all the buildings, and Long Williams lost his team. Then word came that Cass was up at your cabin. I was afraid you were in direct line with it, so I called the men out from the Swede Camp—they've been hunting all morning for you."

Nan tried to smile. "That means our chateau's gone up in smoke."

"I got to it this morning, just after the fire passed. The cabin and barn were just two piles of cinders. Everything's burned this side of Sheridan Creek and on the other side clear to the Pass."

"What started it?"

North shrugged. "What's been starting all these fires? Well, so long as it didn't get any of you—" He looked down at his torn clothes, then laughed at a sudden recollection. "Guthrie singed off most of his fine mustaches trying to force a way up to your cabin when he heard you were all there. Nobody could get through."

"How did you?" Nan asked.

"I didn't. I came around and cut in behind it." He glanced down noncommittally at his boots, the soles charred and cracking from walking among hot wood ashes.

Again he saw Nan shiver, and rising, North helped her to her feet. "You need hot coffee and dry clothes, little sister. I'll take you out to the woods road. We'll get one of the teams to give you a lift as far as the Swede Camp."

Skirting the burning timber, they made their way over ashes that were still warm out to the main logging road, where North helped Buffalo and Nan into a light buckboard.

"Room for you too, Cass," he said, but she shook her head.

"I'll have to get back to Wolfshead as soon as I can. Father knows I am up here and he'll be wild with worry until he sees me."

Followed by North, she turned off down the trail, and near the path to his own cabin she stopped and held out her hand in farewell.

"I must hurry," she began, and her voice sounded curiously weak. For a moment she stood there looking uncertainly about her, then suddenly she reeled. The strain, coupled with that long vigil in the icy waters had taxed her strength more than she

knew, and crumpling, Cass fell prone at the man's feet.

Stooping, he raised the wet, limp body and ran down the trail to his cabin. The door stood open, and laying her on the narrow bunk, North drew off her riding boots and stockings, then wrapping her feet in a blanket, covered the girl with a thick *sugan*. Water was simmering in a kettle and within a few moments the odor of boiling coffee began to spread through the cabin.

He laughed with relief when Cass opened her eyes. "This may not be the orthodox prescription, but I thought it would bring you to." And raising her head, he held a cup to her lips.

"Did I faint?"

"Something like that. You've been through too much. Feel better now?"

She took another sip of coffee then lay back on the pillow, and he could see her cheeks gather color.

"I feel wonderful. I'm actually warm again."

He tucked the *sugan* close about her neck, and Cass felt his hands tremble.

With sudden anxiety she cried, "Are you hurt?"

He saw that his big brown hands were shaking and resentfully he clenched them, then turned away.

Frightened, she half rose from the cot. "Corrin, you're trembling."

"That surprises you, does it?" His voice surged in a sudden angry outburst. "You see me trembling and you can't imagine why. Perhaps that's because you don't know what it is to hunt for someone you're afraid to find—someone who may be lying up in the forest where the fire passed. Maybe you don't know what it is to go calling as I have from dawn until noon, dreading to take the next step for fear I'd find you too late." Filled with reproach, the man's deep voice rumbled in that little cabin. "Do you think that's reason enough for my hand to shake a little?" He laughed, but there was no happiness in that laugh. So harsh and mirthless was it that Bounce looked up uneasily from beneath the table.

"Yes, I suppose it's a little comic to tremble for the life of a girl who lied to me and played with me." Striving for calmness, North reached within his pocket, and drawing out tobacco, tried to roll a cigarette. But the tobacco spilled through his fingers, the paper tore, and throwing the thing from him, he

would have turned away only her hand still held him, and now she leaned closer.

"Corrin, please!" Her own eyes had saddened, reading the pain in his. "We've been through too much today, both of us. I'm done up." She forced a weary smile. "But I don't want you to think I ever lied to you. It wasn't that." She stopped, as if at a loss. "Some things, Corrin, are so hard to put in words."

North's eyes were still rebellious. "Once I heard Helen Guthrie say that all men who know you sooner or later fall under your spell. Is that what you want out of life—to make love a game? If it is, I tell you it's a rotten game." The voice softened. "And yet that couldn't have been the girl I knew less than a year ago. Was it a game you were playing then, Cass?"

She shook her head. "No, love wasn't a game with me—not ever. But sometimes you make me afraid."

"Were you afraid of me down there in New Mexico?"

"Terribly—we were both mad."

"I wonder—I only know I was happy. Yes, perhaps it was mad—for both of us. You didn't even know who I was. You didn't know anything about me."

"I don't now."

"Why should you—now?"

"Why?" Her hands, like the hands of a frightened child were on his shoulders, her hair, still wet from the waters of the creek, lay close about her forehead. Dimly they realized that the anguish of the long morning had torn away barriers from between them, and within her she felt a yearning she thought had long been laid to rest.

"Listen, Corrin." The voice scarcely disturbed the midday silence of the cabin's gloom. "No matter whatever happens, no one will ever mean to me what you have meant." The words were almost a whisper, the merest echo of a whisper, while she looked up at him with unflinching eyes.

For a moment only that silence endured, and now North was leaning over her, now he raised her in his arms.

"I let you go once, Cass—" She felt his arms tighten about her. "I'll never let you go again."

Her eyes had closed. The warmth of his lips was against her lips, and with a last effort she raised her hand. But the hand barely brushed his cheek, then fell back to her side. Locked to

him, her face hidden against him, time for her had ceased. That nightmare of fire was forgotten—nothing existed but the security and peace of those surrounding arms.

Suddenly a low warning bark from Bounce broke the stillness, and startled, they turned toward the door.

There, outlined against the daylight, Bert Pogue stood watching, and behind him Jean L'Abat grinned over his master's shoulder.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

UNHURRIEDLY North released the girl.

In the half darkness of the cabin Pogue's eyes gleamed faintly and the lines on his thin face deepened while in threatening silence he regarded Cass.

"I've been looking for you since daylight." The voice, when at last he spoke, sounded curiously muffled, as if only by a violent effort he held himself in control. "Men are hunting for you on every trail and logging road. But—" his eye drooped, "I hardly expected to find you here."

Briefly Cass told him of the long vigil in Sherigan Creek with Nan and Buffalo, while Pogue and Jean listened intently.

Once L'Abat laughed. "So the fire almost got old Buffalo," and he grinned toward his master.

"I knew Father would be frantic with fear," Cass went on, "and I started down the trail. Then just outside this cabin I fainted." She stopped. A little flush rose to her cheeks.

Pogue's fingers were moving restlessly. "I advise you to hurry down to Wolfshead and tell your father you're safe." His tongue seemed to loosen—but the fingers still plucked without ceasing at his quirt. "My horse is outside—take him."

"Aren't you coming down?"

His face twitched. "No, there are one or two things I want to take up with North."

She sensed the half hidden menace in the man's words, and turned questioning eyes on North, but Corrin nodded. "They must be worrying about you, Cass. Better go," he urged.

Partly reassured, the girl drew on her stockings, thrust her feet into boots that were still wet, then throwing off the coverings North had wound around her, she stood up. Uncertainly she steadied herself against the bunk.

"Sure you can make it?" Quick concern was in North's voice.

"Surely."

He lifted her into the saddle then calling to his dog, pointed down the trail. "You go along, boy."

"What can Bounce do?"

"He can tell me that you got there safely."

Cass picked up the reins. "Thanks for hospitality and a warm blanket." With a last glance at Pogue standing grimly silent in the doorway, she turned, and followed by the dog, rode down the trail.

No one spoke until the sound of the horse's hoofs had died away. Outside, far off clouds of smoke were darkening the sun, throwing the little cabin into even deeper obscurity, rendering unreal those three watchful figures within the shadows. With studied care North folded the blanket, laid it at the foot of the bunk, then looking up at Pogue, broke the long silence.

"Do you want to talk to me?"

"Don't you think it's about time?"

Forebodingly the atmosphere had changed. It was as if with the girl's departure both men at last laid aside the thin veil of neutrality. An ominous note had crept into their voices, and suddenly the cabin itself was filled with a sense of impending fatality.

L'Abat, too, felt that electric warning, and with eyes fixed on the two men he stood by the open door, alert and ready.

"North," Pogue's incisive voice rasped, "I've just about decided this country isn't big enough for you and me. One of us has got to leave—*and I'm going to stay.*"

Deliberately North brushed the gray ashes from his shoulders. "That's too bad. Suppose I plan to stay too?"

"Then you'd better plan again. From now on the Wind River country isn't going to be exactly a health resort for you. I've been wondering about you for months, and some strange things have happened during that time. You advised me once to come to a decision. Well, I have—I don't want you around." Pogue thrust his face closer. "This morning I learned it was you who telephoned the Forest Service men about this fire. That gave them a two hours' start they wouldn't have had otherwise. When the jam went out last spring it was you who jumped in and pulled that damned ranger out, although you knew from the first he was one of the biggest obstacles we had. And then—"

Pogue's heavy eyes fell to L'Abat, "It was you who persuaded Jean to leave Guthrie in that cabin with only Larsen to guard him. What happened after that no one knows, but maybe I could guess. At any rate, Larsen was found shot through the head and Guthrie was gone. Each time you've had some excuse that sounded plausible enough, but when you put them all together they spell something to me."

"And that is?"

"You've double-crossed me for the last time!"

"Why do you kid yourself, Pogue?" the quiet voice asked. "What you really mean is you don't want me here because of Cass."

"That may be one reason—why not? I'm not going to have the name of Catherine Mirov tied up with a four-flushing lumberjack." Pogue's voice shook. "What is she to you? What did she ever mean to you?" Through the darkness North could see the man's face was twisted with distrust.

"Why don't you ask her?"

"Damn you, I'm asking you—and you're not man enough to tell me."

"No? Well, there's one thing I will tell you, Pogue. No man ever bluffed me out when I wanted to do a thing—and if I want to stay here, I stay. Is that clear?"

Pogue made no answer, no move, but in that instant he had reached a decision. Turning his back on North, he faced toward L'Abat, and almost imperceptibly he nodded.

"I'll give you just one week to get out of here." Pogue was speaking more slowly, more calmly now, and while he talked he stepped to North's side, as if to emphasize his words. "When the week is up your supplies will be stopped at the commissary. If that's not enough, the sheriff will let you know how welcome you are down in Wolfshead."

The voice went on, bitter with pent-up malice, but in the gloom, L'Abat moved ever so little, his hand lowered slowly, inch by inch.

North had not changed his position. He stood with tall body lightly balanced, leaning slightly forward, his eyes on Jean, while beneath his shirt the long muscles rippled. Like two fencers the men held each other's eyes, and still Pogue's voice, "You can't buck me up here, North. You can't——"

He stopped. Without warning he flung himself behind North,

and wrapping both arms about the man's body, called shrilly to L'Abat, "Draw, I've got him! Draw!"

Jean's big hand lunged for his gun, but even before his fingers closed over the stock something happened—something incredibly swift. Flinging up his left hand, North had seized the back of Pogue's neck, and leaning forward, pulled him bodily over his shoulder while in the same motion he thrust the man's arm high up between his shoulder blades in the dreaded hammerlock. Agonized and helpless Pogue found himself held as a shield before his armed ally.

"Drop the gun, Jean," North was saying. "Drop the gun. I've got eight cartridges here to blow you out that doorway."

Jean's eyes widened in wonder, for North seemed to have made no motion, but through the gloom L'Abat saw the black muzzle of a .45 pointed at him. For a moment he wavered, yet there was no way to reach North without endangering the life of his own chief, and reluctantly the huge hand dropped to his side.

"On the floor, Jean, on the floor," the calm voice commanded, and the gun fell with a thud.

Pogue's face was graying with the pain that shot through his arm and shoulder, and now he uttered a low groan. Releasing his hold, North thrust the man from him, and walking forward, picked up L'Abat's weapon.

"A hell of a pair of bad men, aren't you?" He dropped the gun in his pocket, and Jean's thick neck grew red beneath that voice of cold contempt.

North turned directly to Pogue. "So after six months of hesitation you've decided that I'm dangerous to you? You're a little slow in making up your mind. I should think that might be a fatal drawback to anyone who wants to play the big bad man out in this country. Now I'll tell you your real trouble, Pogue. You couldn't decide which you wanted most—to kick me out or to keep me here until you had me so tied up with your dirty work that you'd have me where you wanted me. Meanwhile you've been eaten up with distrust and suspicion in that rotten heart of yours. Once before you threatened to get me if I didn't play your game. Well, now is your chance." He tapped Pogue's chest. *"I'm staying here.* And the next time you try this sort of thing, you better make a job of it for one of us is going to go. Now get out."

Like an angry bull Jean lowered his head and took a short step forward, as if in spite of the weapon in North's hand a wave of savage fury forced him on, but one look into those determined eyes told him that once the black automatic raised again no power on earth could save him.

Pogue, already outside, stopped to look back. He pointed a warning finger at the figure within the cabin.

"Keep out of my way, North," his voice quivered. "There's room for only one master of this country."

North was still standing in the doorway when without another word Pogue and L'Abat turned down the trail.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Master of this country." The words lingered in North's memory long after the two men had gone. In thoughtful contemplation he stood looking out at the dappled sunlight of that late summer afternoon. Peace—the great, boundless peace of the forest lay like a benediction about him, yet he realized that his time of greatest danger had come. For there was no escaping the certainty that from now on all pretense of neutrality between Pogue and himself had passed—from now on it was war until the end—whatever that end might be. Pogue would lose no time now in ridding himself of a presence that had become increasingly dangerous, and he would work through his many henchmen—chiefly through L'Abat. Reluctantly North had to face the fact that it would be no very difficult task for them to lie in wait for a lone man along the forest trails. A shot, a body tossed in some sunless gulch—as easy as that.

So for the better part of an hour he stood in thought, and at last entering the cabin, thrust his automatic back into the shoulder holster. The smell of coffee reminded North he had not eaten that day so he made a hasty meal, and toward its end felt a wet nose touch his hand. Bounce had returned with the air of a job well done, and North knew that Cass was safely home. Yet his eyes remained contemplative, his mind still busy with the knowledge that just ahead lay the crisis, not only of his plans but of his very life, and of the final outcome he was far from certain.

And it was so Guthrie and Mills found him when they came

in from the fire line. The ranger helped himself to coffee.

"We just heard Pogue talking up at the Swede Camp. What's this about your being through?"

"What did Pogue say?"

"Said you'd be leaving Wind River before long, and none of the loggers were to take any orders from you."

North smiled, and seeing the question in their eyes, he told them what had happened in the cabin, but as he repeated Pogue's parting threat, the faces of both forest men grew serious, and Mills scratched his head.

"I've never figured you out, old timer," he said at last. "You always seem to know where you're going, even if nobody else does. And I've sure wondered why Pogue let you stick around so long."

"I think I know the reason," North answered. "Pogue wanted to prove I was a scoundrel. If he could show me up before the people of Wolfshead it would have been worth much more to him than just getting me out of the country—one way or another. His game was to use me and then frame me."

Mills nodded. "And now that's out. From now on, Corrin, you're a marked man up here. There isn't a dirty card in the deck that Pogue won't play until you're—" He stopped.

"Done in." North finished the uncompleted sentence.

Mills nodded. "Yes, in one way or another. Pogue won't care how it happens or who does it just so it's done quick. I've lived a long time in this country, Corrin, and I know these men. My honest advice to you is—get out."

North bent over the table to light the lamp, and when again he turned both Guthrie and the ranger read in the square set of his jaw a determination not to be changed by any words.

"I'm staying here."

Mills looked with a quick smile at the Supervisor.

"I knew that would be the answer, Boss."

But Guthrie's face was sober. "I'm almost sorry to hear you say that, North. I think you're doing a dangerous thing, for no power in the world can protect you from Pogue and his gang once they set out to get you. You alone will have to look out for that. In a fairly long life I have never met a man so well able to take care of himself as you are, but I am absolutely certain that L'Abat and the rest of those wolves will be on your trail night and day. The odds may be too great—even for you."

The Supervisor rose. "Well, I've warned you, and I know your answer—you're determined to stay. But you can't stay in this cabin."

"Why not?"

Impatiently Mills frowned. "Hell, Corrin, there's no sense in making it too easy for 'em. You've got to come over to the station with me. My biscuits are guaranteed to crack any bridgework that ever was forged." He laid a hand on North's sleeve. "Come on, old fellow—we'll have a swell time batching together."

A wave of affection for this quiet, loyal friend came over North. And yet—to go to the ranger station would be bringing danger with him.

But Mills was already rolling up the other's bed. "Let's start right now," he urged—and Corrin surrendered.

That same night two things happened. North's cabin was burned to the ground, and North himself disappeared.

When the news broke among the camps that Corrin North was no longer in the Wind River country, the tale spread like wildfire to Wolfshead. From lip to lip the story ran, and many wild theories gained credence. Flight, abduction, cold murder—all these possibilities were openly discussed. No one had seen him go. The stage had not taken him, that was certain, and his absence remained an unsolved mystery until a rancher coming up from the lower country disclosed that he had seen North going out on the lower road with a freighter bound for Lander. Meanwhile the men of Wind River were still grimly counting their losses that lay in the wake of the flames. The settlers especially had suffered. A dozen ranchers had seen their winter stacks of hay blaze up like great tinder boxes, and two ranch houses lay in ashes. Fences were down, and over a hundred head of stock dead or missing. For two days, driven by the wind, the fire had leaped every barrier, and in spite of rangers and fire crews, burned as far as the low ridges that flanked Starlight Pass. There the rangers did the impossible—they held it. On the east bank of Sheridan Creek they were not so fortunate, and a long triangular strip lay black and smoking that a little while before had been living forest. There were ugly mutterings along Wind River those days, and many questions asked about this sudden scourge of fire.

Long Williams, the rancher, made no effort to conceal his own suspicions. "Damned queer thing those fires never start on the company's property," he said more than once. "It's always on the National Forests." Not a few settlers felt as he did, but in spite of suspicion they realized how dependent they were on the good will of the lumbermen—and did nothing. After all, no one could be definitely saddled with the blame, and Pogue's men were making good use of the fire to point out that the Forest Service had once more proved itself unable to protect its own property.

A week went by without further word from North, and now the men of the logging camps put it down as certain that he had heeded Pogue's warning and left the country. Pogue himself was well satisfied with the outcome, for North's flight made unnecessary certain steps that even for Pogue held elements of danger, and left him free for his principal work—the overthrow of the Forest Service. So it was in high good humor that at the end of the week Bert Pogue left for Washington.

Another week passed and still no sign of North—if Mills knew what had become of his friend he gave no word, but went on about his daily tasks. They were trying days for Cass, and perhaps the only one who refused to be disturbed was Helen Guthrie herself.

"He hasn't gone just because Bert Pogue threatened him," she announced with calm conviction. "If Corrin North let that drive him out of the country, I'm no judge of the male species."

And the very next week proved how right she was. As quietly as he had left North arrived one evening in Wolfshead, and with his pack on his back, walked through the dusk over the trail to the ranger station. Mills looked up as the tall figure darkened the doorway, and with the characteristic stoicism of the woodsman nodded toward a chair. "Dinner's ready," he said laconically. Silently North sat down.

And that was all.

But the rupture between North and Pogue had become common knowledge. None of the details was known, either in the camps or in Wolfshead, yet all realized that North's work with the company had been finished, and for several days following his return loggers from the Swede Camps and tie cutters from their solitary cabins came down to the ranger station and in their inarticulate way offered sympathy.

"They trust you," Mills said one night after a little group of friendly tie-hacks had left the cabin. "They know where you stand, and they know you're not a damn' bit afraid. Men will always follow that combination to hell and back."

The ranchers from Wind River—they too went out of their way to show North their good will, for many of them had little reason to love either Pogue or the company. Long Williams himself was one of the first to come up to the cabin. He found Corrin intent on braiding a hackamore, and grinned beneath his long mustaches.

"Looks to me like you got your nerve, young fellow, staying in this country after Pogue told you to clear out. Don't you know when you're licked?"

"If I pulled out every time somebody didn't want me around, I'd be on the move day and night."

"Just the same, if I were you I'd go. Pogue runs this country —even us settlers has to sell our hay to his camps or we can't haul for him in the winter. If he wants our timber he buys it at his own price—nobody else can buy it. A one-man outfit." He spat into the fire. "To hell with such a company."

Casually he added, "Some of us are wondering what you're going to do in the way of work."

North looked up. "That's been bothering me too. I can't live on Mills indefinitely."

"Well, the boys just wanted me to say there's a couple of us'll be glad to take you on any time down at the ranches—it won't be much but it'll keep you from starvin'. And whatever you do, remember this—when Bert Pogue gets back, don't close your eyes, even to sleep." Before North could answer, Williams hurried out to his horse.

But that very night events were to take another turn and solve at least one of North's problems. He was returning to the ranger station when he saw smoke coming from the chimney and a light gleaming through the window. Inside were Guthrie and Mills, and for some reason the ranger's face was wrinkled in smiles.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GUTHRIE spoke first. "I suppose you know what Pogue is doing in Washington."

"Making medicine."

"You know Pogue. He took with him a long list of complaints—the number of times the mill had to close and wait for logs, the time they had to stop building the flume because of lack of timber, the fact that the skidways are only half full because we can't fight fire and scale logs at the same time. Oh, he's got plenty on us—and it's all true."

"Worried?"

Guthrie hesitated. "I don't believe in worrying. These gray hairs of mine didn't come from that. Besides, if the Service has to bow to a lot of blustering politicians, I'd better be getting out. I'm too old and my neck's too stiff. But there's no denying Pogue's got a good case, especially when he puts it before a committee of Congressmen that don't know our conditions. They're going to be more influenced by what the directors of a ten-million-dollar organization say than they are about what one lone Forest Supervisor has to offer. If Pogue succeeds in persuading the Governor to start an investigation there will be only one answer—we're licked. We can make excuses, but what good are they? I've heard from friends in Washington that Pogue's even got the administration interested and that there's a real danger of reviving the plan to split up the National Forests and give them to the states."

North nodded. "Yes, he's playing his cards well, and yet—" He concluded the sentence with a shrug.

Mills was watching him. "But let's come back to you. They won't sell you any provisions at the commissary and there's no work for you from the company or any of its contractors. That looks like you're out."

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" North agreed.

Mills laughed outright. "You don't act a damned bit worried."

"Maybe I'm trying to be like Guthrie—and not worry. If I have to leave this country I'm as good as licked, and there's one appointment I'd like to keep before I leave."

The two foresters looked curiously up to see North's steady eyes fixed on the night outside.

"Next Thanksgiving eve marks just one year to the day since I came into this country. It also marks the anniversary of a fight I had with Jean L'Abat, and a good many of the boys are looking forward to a return match—I'd hate to disappoint them."

Guthrie chuckled, and pulled out his pipe. "My rangers have talked about nothing else for the past months. That brings me to something Mills and I were just talking over. We might as well look the facts in the face. You're through with the company and there's nothing you can do down in Wolfshead, for they own the place body and soul. Now, I've just received authorization from Washington to take on another ranger. I don't know how long that'll last—maybe as long as the sale itself, maybe only a few months. It depends on the money back in Washington. You realize how short-handed we've been. We need help, God knows, and when I asked Mills who he wanted——"

"I said just one man," Mills interrupted. "You."

"We'd sure like to have you, North," Guthrie urged. "There's no one I'd rather have to back me up in times like these. On the other hand we can't be blind to the fact that it means constant danger for you. But if you want to wear the Forest Service badge and string along with us, we'll call it a bargain."

For a moment North hesitated. "It wouldn't be fair to you," he said at last. "Up here I'm a marked man. If I joined you, Pogue would try all the harder to smash the Forest Service."

"We can stand that." Mills took the badge from his own shirt, and reaching over, fastened it on North. "Looks pretty good, old son. Better wear it."

There was no further hesitation. "I'll be proud to," North answered simply, and Mills grinned in open delight.

Swiftly the last few sunny days of autumn passed. Already the nights were growing colder and early mornings held the first chill of approaching frost. North at his new task spent long hours in the saddle riding with Mills up and down Wind River, scaling logs and marking timber, for again the cutters were working to make what progress they might in these days of perfect weather before the deep snows slowed them down and forced them to cut roads through the piled up drifts.

Long lines of freighters were bringing in tools, clothing, supplies, everything that men might need to endure the coming storm-swept months up there on the roof-top of the world. For soon the road that led out over the Painted Desert would cease to be a road, and lost beneath drifting snows would become part of the bleak, wind-lashed waste where day after day no living thing might move. Meanwhile, sheltered beneath the

granite shoulders of the Rockies, the men of the logging camps made ready to cut their way to another harvesting of pine and spruce—another drive.

Days of rain followed—cold, slanting rains that beat ceaselessly on the sodden pine needles and aspen leaves and soaked the dripping forest while mountain peaks and lowlands were lost behind gray veils of drifting mists.

Then in the night the first snow came. A light covering of fine, feathery flakes that began about midnight, floating down from Starlight Pass, but by morning fully three inches of the Rockies' first winter garment lay across the land. It covered the granite peaks of the high country with a new whiteness and glittered on every faceted side of Pinnacle Butte. It lay heavy on the firs and spruce trees and turned each park and grassy slope into a gigantic notebook wherein coyote and wolf, elk and white-tailed deer inscribed their own account of the night's happenings.

The first snow. By mid-morning it was melting wherever the sun touched it, but the forest men were jubilant, knowing it meant the end of the fire season, the harbinger of months of driving blizzards, and on that same day Guthrie called the fire lookouts down from their towers—the menace of forest fires was over.

The grizzled Supervisor's task had lightened during those past weeks. The presence of North on his ranger staff was one important reason. The loggers worked well with him, and in spite of his new connection they trusted him more readily than they trusted the company officials. "If Corrin North says it's right—it's right." Many a dispute ended with those words.

But another menace was already threatening the men of the Forest Service. One day in late November Pogue returned from Washington, flushed with satisfaction, for the long trip had been successful beyond even his ambitious dreams. The night of his arrival he outlined his accomplishments to L'Abat with visible elation.

"This time the fuse is started, Jean," Pogue's jubilant voice began, "and before the year is out the Forest Service will get a blast it won't recover from. The powers that really count in Washington are strong to turn back the forest lands to the states." He smiled. "That little idea is going to go big with the states themselves, and there will be plenty of gravy in it for us.

Every Western senator was for me, and they've promised to back anything in Congress that I start. So on the way up I stopped in at Cheyenne. I told the Governor how our work was being wrecked by the rangers, and he's promised to send up a personal representative. Once the Governor is satisfied with our position, the State of Wyoming will protest to the Federal Government. Washington will get busy, and—" Pogue raised his hands in a wide gesture, "the Forest Service is out."

"And then?"

"And then we do business with the state people—with our good friends, savvy?" Pogue's eye closed slowly.

He had reason to be elated. Everything was working out famously. The directors of his wide-flung corporation possessed influence in high quarters and needed small urging to make that influence felt. It ought not be difficult with such powerful friends to see that valuable forest lands would fall among appreciative hands. The good old days of doing what they wanted with the forests would be back again.

Yes, a satisfactory meeting for all concerned, and Jean especially rejoiced, remembering the great things Pogue had promised him as soon as their hopes became realities. So at the close, he looked admiringly into his leader's eyes.

"By Gar, I always say you finish well those things what you begin."

Pogue laughed complacently. "Begins to look like it's all in the bag. The only thing I regret is that I had to spoil your fun."

L'Abat's eyes were puzzled. "What you mean?"

"I mean your little friend North. Too bad I had to kick him out of the country before you could take him apart next Thanksgiving."

But this time it was Jean's turn to smile. "Keek him out? You only t'ink you keek him out. Corrin Nort' he is back now wit' Forest Service down at Mills' ranger station."

*"What?"*

*"Certainement.* He wear the pine tree badge an' scale the logs. I would 'ave fix him myself but I remember you say not to lay hands on forest men while you are gone."

"So he's still here." Pogue's face tightened, and his drooping eye twitched. "Well, by God, we'll end that!" Reaching forward, he tore off a telegraph blank, scrawled a short message, then called to his clerk.

"Have them relay that to the telegraph company." Violently Pogue threw the pencil from him. "Thinks I'm bluffing, does he?" His eyes were blazing, and in a burst of anger he gave way to a volley of oaths. Jean went out silently, not daring even to bid goodnight to this man who sat clutching the table, his lips still moving with whispered imprecations.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Crisp, glittering days followed while far above the Pass snow clouds piled higher and higher, and weather-wise woodsmen looked with foreboding at that heavy sky to read the message that those perfect days of autumn would soon be over. Above the Pass snow clouds began rolling, then suddenly that lazy spell of Indian summer was gone. Barely a week before Thanksgiving a savage blizzard broke over the Rockies, and Wolfshead lay blotted out in a swirl of blinding snows. It came not without warning. Word had already been broadcast that storms were driving down out of Canada. Throughout the night warnings flashed across Idaho and northern Montana, and with the rising sun the first flurries were sweeping across Starlight Pass and out into the Painted Desert.

A world of snow. Back in the forest depths, shielded from the howling gale, great feathery flakes fell silently, wavering earthward as leaves fall in late autumn, covering the brown carpet of dead pine needles, clinging to the black branches and tree trunks, wiping out of existence every road and trail.

Up above timberline, where the cold fury of the gale swept unhindered, sheet after sheet of snow in serrated lines of whiteness struck obliquely against the granite cliffs. Deeper and deeper the great drifts piled, steadily filling the gorges of the high country. No one worked those days—no one ventured out. Men kept to their snug cabins, beasts to their lairs. Only the great herds of elk, on the south boundary of the Yellowstone, caught by that sudden change, came drifting down before the storm, passing Black Rock in herds of thousands, working their way down toward Warm Spring Creek, seeking the sparse winter range below. Antlered heads bent before the storm, they moved in a brown, wavering army down out of the hills and across the wind-swept parks.

For two days Wolfshead lay prostrate in the storm's path, snow piling window-high against the buildings, long drifting banks of whiteness making the streets impassable. But on the third day the sun shone, and slowly Wolfshead began digging itself out while above in the forests the loggers' teams emerged one by one, plunging and straining through the crusted drifts, breaking out the roads. Freezing nights hardened the sled tracks until once more a network of glass-smooth ice roads stretched back into the timber and up to the edge of the cutting. Another logging season was on.

Down in Wind River valley the blizzard had brought new suffering to the ranchers, and Guthrie turned his rangers from their work on the timber sale to help the settlers hunt their storm-bound livestock and haul feed for the weakened horses and steers.

And it was on the morning of that third day North found an opportunity to plant a seed destined later to bear important fruit. A band of Long Williams' cattle had drifted before the storm into a narrow box canyon and now, half starved, were unable to retrace their steps through the snow. Coming upon them, North spent the morning breaking trail for the weakened animals, and at last got them safely out upon the flat, where he herded them into a sheltered pasture. At the corral he met Williams and together the two rode to the ranch house for coffee. Once inside, Williams lighted a pipe and said abruptly,

"North, there's been something on my mind for a long time. Us settlers was the first to come into this country. We did the hard, dirty work of making it habitable, and we built us homes out here. Then this company buys up the timber and proceeds to act like it owned Wolfshead and the ranchers too. At first they paid their share of the taxes, but now with their own political gang in power they've got things fixed so that nearly all the burden comes on the settlers. We can't buck an outfit that size, but I'm damned if I'm willing to take it laying down."

North smiled. "Don't blame the company, Williams. Blame yourself—and all you ranchers who watched the corporation get away with everything they wanted and never raised a hand. You let the company put in its own sheriff. You let them take over the government of Wolfshead. You won't stand up for the Forest Service in its fight with them, so I don't see that you've got any complaints."

Williams nodded. "I ain't denying that—we've been too damned mealy-mouthed all along. Some of us boys are gettin' a little tired of it. The company's been acting like it was God Almighty around here, especially since Pogue came back, and it begins to hit our pocketbooks. Last spring they built that splash dam up Sheridan and bogged down part of my best grazing country. I kicked and they laughed at me. Pogue as good as told me it was just too bad, and that was all there was to it."

North had finished his coffee and reached for his snow glasses. "As long as you take it lying down you'll get what you deserve and not a thing more. If you ranchers had the guts to buck them and if you all worked together in the same direction, you'd get somewhere. Trouble is, you fellows have never got together. Not once have you ever put up a united front. That's your weakness." And he went out to his horse.

But Long Williams was not to forget that talk with North in the ranch house.

That same day a telegram in the company's code was phoned up to Pogue at the Swede Camp and its content so filled him with delight that he hurried down at once on skis. He reached Wolfshead just after noon and went first to Catherine Mirov's where to his increased satisfaction he found Catherine and her father were just beginning an early dinner with the Supervisor and Helen Guthrie. Pogue felt a warm glow of satisfaction—here was a fitting audience for the unfolding of his little drama.

"Can a very hungry man join you?" he asked, and Cass rose to set a place for him at her side.

For months relations between Guthrie and Pogue had been at the breaking point, and now a constrained silence fell about the table, interrupted only by Pogue's suave, untroubled comments on the storm. He seemed not to notice Guthrie's silence or the pre-occupied attitude of the girl at his side, but rather to be hugely enjoying himself as the possessor of news that like some choice morsel, should be kept until the proper time to divulge it. At last, the meal over, Pogue leaned back and lighted a cigar.

"I hear you're decreasing your force up Sheridan Creek." He turned toward Guthrie, and his voice drawled a little.

Guthrie's gray eyes hardened. "How did you hear that?"

Pogue laughed. "Oh, flocks of little birds tell me things. I

could even quote you a telegram you got this morning word for word." He watched the blue smoke curling upward. "What a shame to lose your man-killing ranger so near Thanksgiving. My boys will be heartbroken. They've been hoping all year to see a return match between him and Jean. You know, the sheriff has a theory that North is connected with some Red outfit and came out here to organize the woods workers. Well, he was a queer fellow. You're lucky to be rid of him."

With startled eyes both Helen Guthrie and Cass were watching him. Helen spoke first.

"Is Corrin North leaving the Forest Service?"

Pogue waved his hand toward the Supervisor. "Ask your husband."

Unwillingly Guthrie nodded. "A telegram came from Washington this morning ordering me to eliminate all temporary men from the rolls."

"But North was the only temporary man you had," Helen objected. "Do you mean the order was directed especially at him?"

"It looks like it. Some influence was probably brought to bear back in Washington." Guthrie's face and the tone of his voice left no doubt of his certainty as to the quarter whence that influence came. "If he'd been one of the permanent force he would have been safe from that sort of thing. I didn't want to tell you until later." The forester's hands knotted in anger. "North was loyal, he was doing the work of two men, and he might have made a great career for himself in the Service. And his reward is a knife in the back."

Helen Guthrie's eyes were bright with resentment. "What must he think of all of us—what *can* he think of us except that everyone has turned against him. When he joined the Service I was certain he'd find security there. Corrin loved the work, and every one of the rangers liked him. I saw him just before the last snow. He and Mills were scaling a skidway and he was joking because Harry couldn't keep up with him. I heard the sound of their laughter as I went down the trail." With heavy heart she added, "There'll be no more laughter now."

The woman looked out the window toward the endlessly stretching snow-fields and up to where the glittering peaks threw back a noonday sun. "Winter, and everyone's hand against him."

None answered the accusation that lay behind those words. Pogue himself kept turning the long cigar between his fingers, his eyes on the faces about him. He may have been hugely enjoying his hour of triumph—one couldn't say.

Then suddenly that silence was shattered. Throwing her chair back, Cass sprang to her feet, and now she stood before Pogue with both small hands clenched, a patch of vivid color in each pale cheek.

*"I won't stand for it!"* The clear voice held a ring the man had never heard, the deep blue eyes blazed with a new fire. "Only a coward would do what you have done," the low, accusing voice went on. "What have you against Corrin North that you couldn't rest until you hounded him out of this country? Are you afraid of him?" Desperately she turned to the older woman. "You're right, Helen. What must he think of all of us who have turned against him—even Jack Guthrie."

"I haven't turned against him, Cass," Guthrie answered gently. "I'd rather lose a hand than go through with the thing I've got to do."

"That's it. But you're going to do it just the same. You're going up there and tell him he's through, and you won't even be able to give him any reason for it—there isn't any reason except that Bert Pogue doesn't want him around. And if he comes down here, every cheap politician in Wolfshead who keeps his job because of Bert Pogue—every one of them will turn on him like a pack of curs, call him an agent of the Reds, and drive him out."

She was beyond stopping now—it was as if something long pent up in her had snapped and now she turned directly on Pogue. "Did you have him dropped from the Service?"

He would not answer.

"Did you?" Her blazing eyes challenged the lie already on his tongue.

"Yes."

"You, with all your power here, yet you have to use it to force one lone man out of this country. And I'll tell you why. It's because you have never really trusted me—not once. You've always wondered what Corrin and I were to one another back in New Mexico. Well, you won't have to wonder any more—I'll tell you myself.

"For two months I knew him, and in those two months I

loved him more than I will ever love anyone else in the world. I know it now, but I wouldn't admit it then—not even to myself. I felt I was being disloyal to you. I hated myself for loving him, but when he was with me nothing in the world mattered. His will was my will, but always there was my promise to you. At last he asked me to marry him and I was wildly, madly happy. We were to go out to one of the old missions there, and then," Cass's voice dulled, "something kept telling me I wasn't free. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I wrote him a note the night before we were to be married, telling him to forget about me, and I came back here." Forlornly her arms crept about her father's shoulders. "Daddy dear, I've been so terribly unhappy since then."

"I know, I know." The old doctor stroked her hair. "But the thing you haven't said, little girl, is that you were afraid to follow your heart because of what Bert might do to me."

Pogue's short laugh jarred through the room. "After all, aren't we being a little melodramatic about a man who is as good as gone? Why can't we forget him?"

"I don't want to forget him. I won't let him go—friendless and beaten and everyone against him."

With that swift gesture of hers, she passed her hand across her eyes, and walking across the room, took her mackinaw from the wall. Helen laid her hand on the girl's arm.

"Do you know what you are doing, Cass?"

"Better than I've ever known. I'm going to him. Wherever he is he'll need someone who has a little faith in him. He's been snarled at and thwarted too long. Perhaps I was waiting for Bert to hold out a helping hand. But that—that's unimportant. All that's important now is I know where my heart is. I've been fighting something stronger and bigger than I am, and I know that up there is the man I love."

She turned, but Pogue thrust himself between her and the door.

"I won't let you go like this. I forbid you to go." A rasp of authority grated in his voice, but Cass only shook her head.

"It's too late, Bert. You can't forbid me to do anything now. The time when I might have listened to you is gone. I've waited too long and hoped too long. I tried to believe in you. For days I fought to believe in you, but you wouldn't let me. And now I expect nothing more from you."

He looked at her, his whole face twitching. "You must be mad," he said, and turning to where Doctor Mirov silently watched from the window. "She won't listen to me. I appeal to you to forbid this thing. It will make both of us the laughing-stock of the country."

The old physician smiled. "Is it important what people laugh at?" he asked quietly, his eyes still on his daughter.

Gently Cass laid both hands on her father's shoulder. "Dad, it was you who first told me of love. It's been many years ago, but I can remember every word. And I remember you said that when love—real love—calls you, you should follow; that if you miss love all your life is spent in unimportant gestures. You said that the whole meaning of life was lost. You remember, don't you, Dad? Well, love is calling to me now, out there. It's been calling for a long time and I tried not to hear it. I thought I owed something to duty, to loyalty, but I know at last that nothing matters—nothing in all the world except that I love Corrin North. I want happiness from life, and it's out there. Perhaps sorrow too, and poverty. I don't know—it doesn't matter. I can't change my love, even if he is a floater and a tramp, but I'm not going to let happiness pass me by again. May I go now, my father?"

Bending down, the old man kissed her lips. "Go where your heart is, dear," he told her, and turned away.

Helen Guthrie stepped to the girl's side. "You can't go alone, Cass," and she reached for her cloak.

In another moment the door closed on the two women. The room had grown very silent. The only sound was the wood crackling in the black heater, and at length Pogue looked up. He seemed older, and a deep hatred glowed darkly in his eyes.

"I think," he announced slowly, "this company will need a new physician from now on."

Doctor Mirov shrugged. "Why not?"

Pogue's eyes turned to Guthrie. "And I don't think you'll have to worry about Corrin North's future—that will be taken care of."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

But for Bert Pogue that disastrous day was not to end without some recompense. Leaving the house he walked moodily

back to the commissary to find that Cheyenne had been trying to get him on the phone, and for the next half hour Pogue talked with the state capital, then sent for Jean L'Abat. The woods boss hurried into the office and stopped with a start.

"What's the matter, Boss. You look lak——"

"Don't bother about what I look like. Here's a job for you. Ray Howard, the Governor's right hand man, is coming here on Thanksgiving Day to take testimony against the Forest Service. I happen to know Howard, and I know he's friendly to my general scheme. Also, he's close to the Governor and what he says will go with the bunch down at the capital."

Jean's small eyes were jubilant. *"Eh bien?* Is it not just as you have wanted—all dees?"

Unheeding, Pogue pulled a flask from the desk drawer and took a long drink. "Anyone who wants to appear at those hearings will have that right. Guthrie may want to talk, although I rather think that as a Federal officer he'll take no part in a state investigation. That leaves the ranchers themselves, and they know what side their bread's buttered on. So as I see it I'll do most of the talking."

Happily Jean rubbed his hands. "Is it not fine, all dees?"

Pogue nodded. "It's fine except for one thing. Howard wants to question two men particularly. One of them is me. The other —Corrin North."

A scowl darkened L'Abat's face. "But *nom d'un nom,* how could they even know of Nort' down there?"

"That's what I'm wondering. He may be more dangerous than I ever guessed."

"Does Nort' know?"

"Howard has already wired him in care of Guthrie." Pogue's hand slammed the desk. "Lean closer."

Jean's shaggy head stooped until the brows of the two men almost touched and Pogue's voice drifted lower. *"I don't want North at those hearings.* You've got two days—that's not a damned bit too much. Whatever you do—play safe. We can't afford any blunders. Act as if you expect him to come down and fight you on Wednesday night—*God help you if I see him there.* That's your job."

The dark face moved slightly, the eyes narrowed. Jean nodded and left the room.

Two hours later, up in the Swede Camp L'Abat called five

men together, and when he had finished speaking they sauntered back to their own quarters where each strapped on a shoulder holster beneath his mackinaw. But one of them hurried up the trail, and when safely beyond the camp broke into a trot until he reached the newly built cabin where Nan and Buffalo Lakin made their home.

A whispered word in the dusk, and the girl was running fast as her long legs could carry her toward Sheridan Creek, crossing on the precarious footing of a fallen log, then up again and over the knoll to where, the lights of Mills' ranger station gleamed.

Without waiting to knock, Nan burst in. Seated before the stove, North was winding a heavy bandage about a cut in Bounce's foot; opposite the ranger sat, adding the figures in a scale book. Nan lost no time.

"You've got to to get out of here, Corrin," she gasped, breathless from that headlong race. "You've got to go now, at once." She pointed to the trail. "One of the boys just came over to Grandpop's and told him L'Abat had ordered five of them to get you before the night was out. He said they meant business."

Quick suspicion gathered in Mills' eyes. "Why should one of L'Abat's men spill the news to you?"

"He said Corrin had done him a good turn once."

Mills looked questioningly at North. "What do you make of it?"

"I think Nan has it straight. But I didn't expect it quite so soon." Deliberately North went to the shelf, and taking down his automatic, slipped it into the holster. "So they're coming here?"

"They'll be here any minute. You've got to go, I tell you. You can't—" Desperately the girl grasped his arm. "Oh, make him go." Nan turned imploringly to Mills.

"She's right, Corrin. You've got to get out of this. The two of us can't stand off all of Pogue's army."

North took two extra clips of cartridges from out the desk and dropped them in his pocket.

"I'm not so sure we couldn't," he answered, "but I've got a better plan." He looked down at Bounce. "You better stay here, boy," he added, and then to Mills, "Let's get going."

In another second he had put out the lights, and together with Nan the two men faded like ghosts back into the darken-

ing forest. Careful not to follow the trail, they cut straight over the low divide, keeping back among the shadows, where the spruce lay thickest, walking quietly through the soft snow, stopping often to listen and look about them. But in all that frozen forest nothing stirred.

Hardly had they crossed the low ridge above Sheridan Creek when Cass and Helen Guthrie came up the trail. Weary with their long walk, the two women stopped just outside the station, and seeing no light, Helen tried the door. Locked. She pulled a Forest Service key from her pocket, and throwing open the door, heard the welcoming whine of North's dog. But as she entered, Helen cast a puzzled look about her. The fire burned brightly in the stove, and steam was rising from the kettle, yet throughout the little cabin no sound came—no sign of either North or Mills.

"Perhaps they're out feeding the horses," Cass suggested.

Opening the door at the rear of the ranger station, Helen called, but no reply came, and in even greater perplexity she joined Cass, then pointed to a cigarette stub still gleaming in the ash tray.

"Someone's been here within the last ten minutes." Ill at ease, she gazed through the window at the darkening forest, then with a start she turned. "A man is standing beside the tree out there. He saw me and hid behind it."

Cass stepped to the window. "Do you suppose——"

"I don't know what to suppose. I don't like it. Perhaps——"

The words were drowned in a sudden pounding on the door. Questioningly Helen looked toward Cass, but without hesitation the girl threw open the door. Jean L'Abat stood just outside, three men behind him, and Cass thought she saw still another shadowy figure out on the trail.

At sight of Catherine Mirov, the burly woods boss drew back and fumbling for his cap, pulled it from his head. "We are looking for Meester Nort,' " he began, then catching a movement behind Cass, peered quickly over her shoulder to see Helen Guthrie by the fire:

"Corrin North is not here."

A look of surly suspicion flitted over L'Abat's face. "It is vair' important we see him."

"That may be, Jean. But he isn't here."

"You know where?"

"No."

"When is it that he come back?"

"I don't know that either, Jean. Mrs. Guthrie and I just got here."

Helen Guthrie had walked forward and the three stood in silence while dubiously Jean turned the cap round and round in those great hands of his. Clearly the two women must know something of North's whereabouts. It might even be he was concealed somewhere in the ranger station. And yet—Jean glanced at Cass and seeing her calm eyes full upon him, looked down again. He listened, his eyes on the room beyond, but caught no sound there, no movement.

A little flicker of amusement had come to Helen's lips. "Why so eager to see him, Jean? You're sure to find him tomorrow night at Sweeney's."

A slow answering smile crossed the big man's features. "Me, I am not so sure. I am not so sure Nort' he care to get beat by me again lak he was las' T'anksgiving eve."

"Maybe this time he doesn't expect to get beat."

Jean shrugged. "Las' time I was too easy. Nex' time I put him in hospital, but I do not t'ink he come." Awkwardly he bowed, and with a sign to his followers, turned back into the night.

From the window the two women could see the knot of men still talking close by the edge of the timber.

"I have a strong suspicion," Helen Guthrie whispered, "that those men are going to wait for Corrin along the trail."

"I'm sure of it." Cass's voice lowered with the thought of danger. "Did you see the guns bulging beneath their coats?" Quickly she wrapped the scarf about her neck. "I've got to warn him."

"But how?"

"By finding him. We can't let him walk into this trap. He may be coming down the trail now. You stay here, Helen. Light the light and walk past the window. Act as if we were talking. I'll go out the back way and cut through the timber until I strike the trail. If Corrin comes here at all, it'll be from the Swede Camp."

"They'll see you leave, Cass."

"Perhaps."

"But if they stop you?"

The girl's eyes flared. "Let them try to stop me."

Impulsively Helen Guthrie threw both arms around Cass and kissed her.

"I'm not sure that any man in the world deserves you, dear, but if he does, that man isn't Bert Pogue."

The door closed and Helen was alone.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

It was almost dark outside, and stooping low, Cass crept toward the shelter of the pines, treading lightly that the crunching snow might not betray her. Once among the trees, she circled, making her way in a wide curve back to where the main trail touched the little path that led to the ranger station.

But she had gone only a short distance when the sound of angry voices stopped her and Cass recognized Jean L'Abat's threatening growl.

Was it Corrin? Had he already walked straight into that hostile group? With tightening heart the girl whirled, and abandoning all thought of concealment, ran down the slope.

Their black figures loomed suddenly ahead of her. A man grasped her, and another with drawn revolver peered into her face. Fiercely she struck at the detaining arm.

"Let go of me!" With reluctant obedience the man stepped back, and Cass saw Mills held by two of L'Abat's followers.

"What's this mean?" she demanded.

"We want to ask the ranger some questions, Mees Cass," Jean's surly voice came through the semidarkness.

"These bohunks seem to figure I know where North is," Mills drawled.

"Yes, you know, all right," a voice added, "and just maybe you can be made to tell."

"You're sure welcome to whatever news you get out of me," came the quiet answer. "I've already told you I don't know."

Jean's big hand closed on the ranger's shoulder, and a dark fist shook before Mills' face, but Cass had flung her way into the center of that ominous circle.

"Let him be." On tiptoe she stood before L'Abat. "Do you know what you're doing?" she stormed.

"*Certainement.* I t'ink I know——"

She cut him off. "Let him go, I tell you."

Jean hesitated, then dropping his hand he stepped back. After all, she was the boss's girl.

Abruptly Cass thrust her arm through Mills' and walked with him down the path toward the station. Once out of earshot she whispered, "Is Corrin safe?"

"Safe as he can be in this country—and that's not any too safe. Are they following?"

She glanced over her shoulder, but the night had already effaced them. At the entrance to the station Mills stopped, and seeing a light, asked, "Who's in there?"

"Helen Guthrie. Come inside, Harry."

He shook his head "Can't. I'm on the high lope to round up half a dozen rangers."

"For what?"

"Well, you might call it an honorary escort, or you might even call it a bodyguard."

"For Corrin?"

He nodded.

"Harry," her voice trembled, "are L'Abat's men after him?"

The ranger had already turned down the trail, but at the question he stopped. "They're after him plenty." Then almost to himself he added, "and don't forget tomorrow's the day before Thanksgiving." The blackness enveloped him while she pondered that cryptic saying.

All through the night and the next day that silent deadly search for North went on. L'Abat's men combed the dim trails, shadowed the ranger stations, and toward noon Pogue sent riders to every nearby ranch. The camps already knew that North had been dropped from the Service, and as morning gave way to afternoon the belief spread that he had left the country at last. Yet no one had seen him go through Wolfshead. One logger reported passing North at dawn near the divide making his way on skis toward Jackson's Hole—others doubted the tale.

But neither rumor nor conjecture brought any letup to L'Abat's search. Yet when the dusk of Thanksgiving eve had fallen over mountain and lowland he too was forced to return, savage and unsuccessful, back to Wolfshead.

Here at least was teeming activity. Men from the woods and from the upper trails, cow-punchers from down Wind River and off the lonely ranches, all were pouring into the little lumber town just as on that Thanksgiving eve a year before. The

annual "bust" of the loggers was at hand, the last fling before the long grind of winter. And on this particular occasion there was the added excitement of a prize fight at Sweeney's and the coming of the Governor's representative—for it was common knowledge that on the following day many things might be decided of importance to the company and the Forest Service alike. The rangers themselves said nothing, but from Guthrie down each one knew that those hearings could bear but one result—a body blow to their cause.

And beyond this there was something else that added to the sense of uneasy expectancy, something vague but none the less formidable. All day long a feeling of impending conflict hung in the air, and toward nightfall, as men gathered and talked, that feeling of unrest increased.

Under Long Williams' leadership a change was coming over the long patient ranchers, and for the first time they had come to realize that they themselves had a part to play in the destinies of Wolfshead. Too often Pogue and the North Continental had ridden over them roughshod, taking it for granted they could not resist, and now, added to the past years of ill treatment, open suspicions were rising as to the orgin of the summer's fires. So it was in an ugly mood that the ranchers were gathering from the hills that night.

In Wolfshead itself the same question was on every lip. "Where is Corrin North?" Within the past twelve months—twelve months to the day—the tale of last year's fight had become history throughout the camps and loggers' cabins. For miles around every man was coming down to see those two giants clash again, and many a month's wages had been staked on the outcome. But North's absence was bringing uneasiness among his supporters. Would he fight, or, as one logger put it, had he at last "his bellyful of Jean L'Abat?"

High up on the shoulder of Starlight Pass three men might have answered that question. Tired with the long climb, their frosty breath showing white in the moonlight, they stood resting on their skis, looking out through the dusk to where the lights of Wolfshead were already gleaming. Pulling off his cap, Mills wiped his wet forehead.

"I'm still wondering what the idea was of scaring me and the boss to death," he growled. "I hid you away safe enough in that old cabin, and when we come up to see you, you're gone."

"I went over to Jackson," North answered shortly.

"Sure. Your ski tracks told me that. But why?"

"I wanted to talk over the only telephone that Pogue's men couldn't listen in. That's why I made a twenty-mile run on skis. But there was no need for you fellows to hunt me up."

"The Hell there wasn't. You don't seem to savvy there's a dozen of L'Abat's wolves combing the hills with orders to get you. And I can't help wondering why any telephone message could be so important." With frank curiosity the ranger looked up at North.

"Maybe you'll find out tomorrow, Harry."

For the first time Guthrie spoke. "I had another reason for coming up here to find you, Corrin." His words came hesitatingly, as if he regretted what he was about to say.

"My reason is this. Ray Howard, representing the Governor, has asked you to appear at the hearings tomorrow. I've got eight rangers who are going to see that you get to those hearings in safety. But I don't want you to go down to Sweeney's to fight Jean L'Abat tonight."

North laughed. "Of course I'm going to fight Jean. It would take more than Pogue's orders to keep me away."

"But you're not going, Corrin."

"Why not?"

"Because it's playing into their hands. They're watching every trail. You're the only one we've got to present our side tomorrow. Corrin, if you go down tonight there's nothing Pogue's outfit will stop at to keep you from leaving Sweeney's alive."

Quietly, but with finality, North shook his head. "I've got to go. Some of those men are betting their winter's stake on me. They'd think I was afraid." Half in anger he looked up. "I can't back out a few hours before the fight, Guthrie. Let's drop this talk and get going."

But Guthrie's hand checked him. "There are bigger things in a man's life than just personal bravery, Corrin, and there are more important issues than whether you or Jean L'Abat is the better fighter. Tomorrow the Forest Service enters on a life and death struggle, and in that struggle you may be called on to play an important part. Just why Howard has asked you to testify I can't say, but it gives you your supreme chance to lay our side before him. You can't throw it away. I tell you you

haven't a show down there with L'Abat's crowd—it's not a question of courage. It's foolhardy. Too many things can happen. Wait until the hearings are over. Don't you owe that to us?"

Grim lines had gathered about North's jaw. "How about myself—don't I owe something to the memory of a night when L'Abat hammered me up and down that ring and then boasted of it to the countryside? By God, for a year now he's boasted and I've taken it. Guthrie, I couldn't hold my head up if I quit. It's too much to ask."

"And yet I do ask it—for the Service."

North had turned aside. Impossible to deny the truth of Guthrie's words—yet none the less a bitter pill. Face averted, eyes gazing out over the moonlit snowfields, North fought a silent battle with himself, and at last drew a deep breath.

"You're right." His voice was steeped with regret. "You're right, Guthrie. I won't go to Sweeney's tonight." His hands clenched. "Let's get on down to the station." Once more he looked out over the hills toward Wolfshead, and his eyes tightened.

"Within an hour they'll be saying I was afraid to fight L'Abat. They'll be saying I hadn't the guts."

Guthrie's hand was on the man's shoulder. "I know. But fifty years of living have taught me that what people say isn't so very important, and there are some things of greater consequence than winning a prizefight. I'm prouder of you right now than if you had beaten L'Abat with one hand."

North made no answer, but turned abruptly down the trail.

Light snow had fallen through the late afternoon, but now the sky was crystal clear, the trails newly white and the men's skis sang over the ice-smooth slope as faster and faster they sped on. Trees loomed up and passed them in the darkness, while with Mills in the lead they wound on down that circuitous descent, flashing past the Swede Camp, and ten minutes later pulled up outside the station. North unstrapped his skis and hurried through the gate.

"Bounce will think I've deserted him." Throwing open the door he called inside, "We're here at last, old boy. How's the sore paw?"

But there came no answering bark of joyous welcome, no patter of eager feet.

"Bounce!"

Striking a match, North lit the lamp. "He couldn't have——" That sentence was never finished. Before him, strangely huddled beneath the lamplight, Bounce lay cold and lifeless in the center of the floor. With a cry North kneeled beside the stiffened body, and in deadly silence he drew from the dog's throat a short, bone-handled knife.

Mills leaned forward—the knife told its own grisly story.

"Jean L'Abat!" the ranger muttered, and turned toward Guthrie.

"They came here. They didn't find North, so—" Bitterly Mills cursed, but lost to the sound of his voice, lost to all sense of earthly things, North crouched on the floor, dry-eyed and motionless, caressing with pitifully gentle fingers the shaggy head of one who had been his friend. A rustle of night wind crept through the pines outside, but within the cabin was no sound. Only a man holding in his arms the dead body of a dog, a man who sat gazing straight before him with eyes more dangerous than any outburst of rage.

At last he spoke.

"I let him down. I left him here for those killers to find. I might have known—" The words choked with sorrow, bitter with regret, and Mills, remembering what this dead companion had meant to him, stepped to the door, no longer able to bear the sound of that broken voice.

Very gently Corrin laid the dog's head back on the wooden floor. Slowly he stood upright, and seeing his eyes, Guthrie knew that once more destiny had decreed swift conflict and would not longer be denied.

"I promised you I wouldn't fight Jean L'Abat tonight." North's voice was ominously low. "I take back that promise."

"But——"

Savagely North whirled. "Guthrie, there's no power on earth that can keep me away from Wolfshead now. L'Abat left that knife as a challenge. I am going down to Wolfshead to accept that challenge, and God help one of us tonight."

Guthrie turned to Mills. "Go down and tell the boys to meet us this side of the lower bridge—I want every one of them to come armed and ready in case Hell breaks loose."

But Mills was still looking into North's pale, deadly face. "You're not going to——"

North raised his clenched fists. "I'm going to break Jean L'Abat—break him with *my bare hands.*"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

SWEENEY'S was in full swing.

Long before nine o'clock the room that held the boxing ring had been filling with a dense crowd of loggers, ranchers, and river men. L'Abat was there, towering head and shoulders above the crowd, smiling and joking in high good humor.

"Fighting tonight, Jean?" The question was eagerly asked a dozen times, but he always answered with a shrug and a grin.

"Find Corrin Nort' an' I fight queeck enough."

Pogue, master of ceremonies—he too was there, apparently very much at ease, although if one looked closely one might have seen that the past year had left its indelible trace about the man's mouth, hardening the straight line of his lips, causing that drooping eyelid to fall a little lower. But the cigar was held at the same jaunty angle and his voice and smile were suave and carefree as ever before.

He stood now beneath the white glare of floodlights in the center of the ring, waiting to introduce two lightweight boxers from Cheyenne. A shout of welcome went up from the company's men as Pogue stepped toward the ropes, but the ranchers and settlers at the further end of the room were silent, and Pogue's eyes lingered for a moment on those rough-clad men who sat hunched forward watching him, looking through the smoke-laden air like contemplative figures carved in stone. For a second a vague sense of apprehension seized him and he noticed too that the forest men were not there—neither Guthrie nor Mills nor the rangers from the northern districts. Well, perhaps it was too early yet. Smiling, Pogue held up both hands for silence and moistened his lips.

"Boys," the genial, carefully modulated voice began, "it's a real pleasure to welcome you down here again for what is becoming an annual custom—the prizefight at Sweeney's. This will probably be our last chance to get together and enjoy ourselves until after the log drive, for winter will be on us soon, and we'll be busy making roads and getting the timber out.

"So tonight let's make it a big night—something we can re-

member. First of all we've got a couple of lightweights from Cheyenne who are going to give us all they've got. Then——"

"Where's Corrin North?" a voice shouted. "Ain't he goin' to fight?"

Another called, "Yeah, what about that return match between him and Li'l Jean? I got fifty smackers——"

Pogue raised his hand. "I'm coming to that right now. I had hoped—and I know you too had hoped—that we might be able to match someone against Jean for a fight that would be worth bringing you boys down out of the mountains to see. Last year we got Corrin North. You all remember that fight. From the size of him he should have been able to make it interesting for Jean, but he couldn't take it. Since then he's been boasting about what he would do when he got another chance." Pogue's voice rose. "North has shown how yellow he is all along the line, and he's let you boys down tonight. He was seen this noon over in Jackson's Hole. He's probably there now. Like a yellow cur he has put his tail between his legs and left the country."

Pogue ceased. For a split second silence fell, then from the entrance a clear voice carried to the farthest corners.

*"That's a damned lie!"*

The outer door had swung open and in the center of the passageway, flanked by ten armed rangers, stood Corrin North.

A shout—a deep, rumbling shout of men's voices rose, then stilled, for there was something in North's eyes that brought a hush of instant silence, and within that smoke-filled room each man knew that between those two antagonists the last act of the long drama was close at hand.

Noiselessly, with that catlike walk of his, North advanced down the aisle, and in sudden fear Pogue shrank back. Jean L'Abat jumped to his master's side, but just outside the ring North turned to face the crowd.

"One year ago tonight I came into this country." His voice rose without effort through the quietened room, and every face turned toward him. "In that year I've seen as much of dirty, underhand dealing as I would expect to meet in a long lifetime. I've seen Pogue and his outfit try to grind the very heart out of these forest rangers and lie about them in reports to Washington. I've seen him ride roughshod over every rancher who held land wherever his company is operating. I've seen him put his heel on every man who tried to oppose him because

Bert Pogue thought he was too big and too important to be held back by such meaningless words as justice and decency. I've seen this company hold Wolfshead powerless because they'd been able to get a crooked sheriff to do whatever Pogue wanted him to do. You men who made this country have no more hand in what goes on here than your own cattle have." North looked about him, while through that blue haze of smoke every man leaned forward in his seat, taking in each fateful word.

North threw back his coat. "Well, that's your business. If the ranchers of Wolfshead are willing to bear all this, let them, but if there are any men among you, come with me tomorrow to the hearing and tell what you know." His eyes moved slowly about the room until they paused on Jean L'Abat, scowling and watchful beside his master.

For a second those two men held each other's gaze, and now North took a step forward. "I've a word for you, Jean." The voice never raised, but into it had come the mortal coldness of enmity beyond the reach of words. "Men say you've been looking for me today and that you spread the tale through Wolfshead I was afraid to fight you. That was a mistake, Jean. But you made even a worse mistake. One hour ago I found this in my dog's throat."

With a ring of tinkling steel a knife fell at L'Abat's feet. A slow gasp, a gasp that was like a sigh, passed through the room, but North's voice went on. "You're going to find it was a black moment for you, Jean, when you killed a dog worth more than your whole filthy carcass."

L'Abat's face darkened with anger, then a grin revealed his yellow, rat-like teeth. "You mak' fine words, my frien', but Jean L'Abat he has no use for words—he prefair the fight. Perhaps," his big chest rose, "perhaps you fight me tonight, now?"

"That's just what I came down for."

A laugh, loud and exultant, burst from L'Abat, and he raised those hairy paws of his high in the air. Like a huge grizzly he stood there, happy in the prospect of battle, certain of himself and of the outcome. Once more the room resounded to a laugh that was more like the primal battle cry of some fighting monster of past days.

*"Nom de Dieu,"* the great voice rumbled. "You fool! You fool to even t'ink—" But North had already turned toward the dressing room.

Only a few moments passed before the two men returned, stripped for the fight, and Mills took his place in North's corner just as he had a year ago. The white lights glistened on their naked skin as the gloves were strapped on their hands, while standing on tiptoe, Pogue was whispering rapidly in L'Abat's ear, and once the big woods boss nodded and smiled.

Into the last few seats opposite the loggers, the rangers crowded, while outside men had learned that North was to fight L'Abat and clamored vainly for entrance—the room was jammed to the door. Bets had been laid, and now the silence gathered to a focal point of intensity, while every eye, every thought, was centered out beneath the lights where those two men were listening to the last hurried words of the referee.

*The gong!*

Wary and watchful, they advanced from their corners, heads lowered, eyes steady, then very slowly they began circling, one about the other. Suddenly with a lunge Jean struck. It was aimed low, that blow, too low, and North winced beneath the pain of it while the room rocked with angry voices and a storm of cursing protests rose to the referee.

Just outside the ring Mills was dancing in an ecstasy of rage. "A foul," he screamed, "a damned foul."

But shaking his head, the referee waved the two fighters on. In another second they had closed, and toe to toe, head to head, lashed short, hammer-like blows that beat like punishing flails on their naked skins. Neither was guarding now. Both were beyond all call of caution, each intent on battering into unconsciousness the crouching body before him.

Jean drew back. Once more he stooped and struck with all his might, hitting North a full three inches below the belt.

*"Foul!"* Mills shrieked, and the rafters echoed the word. It was all clear enough. The referee had his instructions—Jean must win, whatever the means.

White and sick with the pain of that treacherous blow, North staggered back, and now every man in the room was on his feet, rangers and ranchers rushing to the ring, threatening, cursing the referee. North swung helplessly against the ropes, and eager to end it all, Jean leaped forward.

But as L'Abat drew back his fist for that final blow, North clinched, holding himself so close that the woods boss was powerless to strike. Once he thrust savagely upward with his

knee, striving again to foul his clinging antagonist, but North was too far to the side, and with a maddened effort Jean shoved him back, just as the gong rang and ended the first round.

Beneath the storm of rage aroused by those two foul blows, the referee was becoming uneasy, and as if to bolster up fast ebbing courage, his eyes sought out Pogue, who stood close to the edge of the ring.

But now, for the first time aware of that shouting, cursing crowd, Jean L'Abat raised his hands for silence. Sweat glistened on the hairy tufted shoulders and upon the matted hair that hid his chest as black with rage he turned to the crowd.

"You say foul? You t'ink I need a referee to tak' my part—me, Jean L'Abat? By gar, as for me, I rather fight wit'out rule. I fight lak the men of the nort' woods fight, wit' feet an' teeth an' claws. I show you soon enough who is the bettair man."

Silence followed that arrogant defy. But only for a moment. Without a word North raised the struggling figure of the referee in his arms and hurled him bodily from the ring. As the man crashed down among the chairs, North ripped the gloves from his hands, and now he turned toward Jean L'Abat, his lips drawn back, his eyes glittering.

"Come on," North's voice boomed through the awestruck silence like a battle cry. "Come on, you yellow-livered butcher —and to Hell with rules."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Not a man moved.

Within that hot and crowded room the silence of death had fallen, the brooding hush of stark expectancy, the moment of lull before the clash of two great forces. Smoke curled unheeded from pipe and cigarette, and the dropping of unseen water sounded strangely through the stillness, while every eye was straining out toward the circle of light where those two stood with crouching bodies and clenched hands.

Then like a taut string the tension snapped. A long-drawn sigh rustled through the room as men breathed again, for L'Abat had ripped off his own gloves and flung them from him. Arms hanging loosely at his side, shoulders stooped and head thrust forward on that bull-neck of his, he advanced flat-footed

and wary over the wooden boards. The grizzly of the Rockies was closing in!

North watched him, making no move. Only his eyes narrowed, and the long bands of shoulder muscles rippled beneath his skin as a wolf quivers with the coming of combat. And still that leisurely, unhurried advance, step by step, closer and closer, until those huge antagonists stood almost within arm's length, their shadows, like grotesque creatures of darkness, huddled about their feet, as if they too were waiting, ready to spring.

And now every man was standing. Jean had closed. Two hairy arms had wrapped about North's waist, bending him backward, and locked together the two men crashed to the floor. Making no effort to break the force of that fall, L'Abat threw the weight of his huge body upon North, hoping to batter the breath from his lungs, and even before Corrin struck the wood, Jean raised one fist high above his head, then brought it down with all the driving power of arm and shoulders straight for the other's upturned face.

But as he fell, North whirled. Hitting the floor upon his side, he rolled from out that vise-like hug and quick as a cat was on his feet. Before Jean could move, he flung himself upon L'Abat's back and forced his own right arm beneath the man's chin in the dreaded strangle-hold. Slowly L'Abat rose to his knees, the great cords of his neck swelling with the pressure of that punishing grip. Stifling, his mouth opened and his face grew darker until the close-set eyes had become two spots of red that glittered evilly under the low, wet forehead. Twice, with all his might, Jean sought to tear away the arm that was mercilessly choking out his life, and failing, threw himself in desperation against a post at the corner of the ring.

With the sound of a pistol crack, North's head struck the bare wood. For an instant the lights of the room darkened, the arm relaxed its hold, and now L'Abat turned. Seizing North in both hands, he raised him bodily in the air, and like a maddened giant hurled him outward.

Straight for the ropes that flying body sped—almost over them, not quite. In full flight North's groping fingers reached out, touched the top rope and clung there to save himself from crashing down among the crowd.

Again Jean charged. Head down, body low, he caught North squarely on the chest, and a gasp broke from Corrin's mouth.

But heedless of the tearing pain, North drove both fists into the dark, triumphant face, bringing blood to L'Abat's grinning lips, sending him tottering back, and now, winded and rocked by that terrific attack, the two men wavered apart and stood at gaze. But only for a moment. Lashed on by a hate that knew neither pity nor pain they closed again, and wet with sweat, reddening with the first blood of torn flesh, they strained and tore at each other's naked skin. Fists rose and fell. The thud of agonized bodies rose above their gasping breath while around the ring, locked together, swaying, stumbling, struggling to their feet again, knowing no other reality than the blood lust that goaded them, these two fought on.

By now the swift contagion of hatred had spread to everyone in the room, and each man was crowding down from out his seat, surging toward the ropes, cursing and urging on his champion. Once, leaning far over the ring, a logger struck North with his closed fist, but before he could repeat the blow, Guthrie knocked him senseless to the floor.

Fights were breaking out about the ring—fights between settlers and Pogue's men, fights between rangers and loggers. The room had become a pandemonium of jostling madmen that swarmed to the edge of the ropes where those great, bloody bodies still crouched, still fighting on. They had lost all sense of time, those two. They had become animals that clawed and growled, struck, turned and struck again. The wind was whistling in North's throat, and L'Abat's breath came in long, whining sobs. The matted hair on his chest and shoulders was wet with sweat, his broken lips stiffened in a set snarl—the grizzly of the Rockies was at bay.

But they were weaker now, both of them, worn down by the killing pace, their agonizing lungs heaving, their aching muscles knotted with the spasm of conflict. Once more they broke, once more L'Abat came charging, but as North braced himself to meet that onrush, the woods boss turned, and while still in the air struck North's chin with his heavy heel. It was a blow well known among Northwestern logging camps, but it came unexpectedly, and North's head shot back with the force of it. Limply he fell against the ropes.

A savage bellow of joy from L'Abat, and gathering himself for a last triumphant effort, he charged with lowered head like a frenzied bull straight at the unprotected body before him.

Lightning swift North dropped to hands and knees, then reaching upward as Jean sprawled over him, he rose, holding the raging woods boss above his head. Higher still North raised the hairy body, then hurled it with all his force down on the wooden boards. The building trembled with the impact of that blow, the floor resounded, but Jean staggered to his feet, half dazed, head lolling from side to side.

Again North's hands were fastening about him and for the first and last time North spoke. "I'm thinking of a dog, Jean," the voice was cold and pitiless as steel, "I'm thinking of a dog with a knife in his throat."

Once more North stooped. Once more he raised that great form high in the air, and again with all his terrific force he he slammed the body to the floor.

"Christ!" a voice shrieked. "He'll kill him. No man can stand that."

None heard, none heeded. With eyes closed and with bleeding lips half parted Jean was staggering to his knees, hands groping for an antagonist he could no longer see. Slowly he gained his feet, while North waited, wary for any tricks.

But L'Abat's time had passed. For a hideous second he stood there weaving to and fro, tottering, crimson and terrible to see, then limply his hands fell forward, his knees bent beneath him, and half turning, he sprawled forward on his face. The grizzly of the Rockies was down.

A deafening shout rocked the place. From the ranks of the rangers rose a deep, exultant roar that was echoed and reëchoed by settlers and ranchers. But the men of the logging camps were silent, their eyes shifting to where Pogue stood, his face ashen and twitching as nervously he opened and closed his hands.

Like a fallen Titan, L'Abat lay in the center of the ring, and turning his back on him, North staggered toward the ropes where for a moment he clung, his whole body quivering with exhaustion. But already that little band of rangers had closed about him, and climbing into the ring, Mills helped him through the ropes, then they carried him in triumph toward the dressing room. From among the loggers a few voices were cursing bitterly, but no hand was raised against North as the green uniforms of the forest men passed down the aisle.

The settlers too were moving jubilantly toward the bar, happy and elated at the outcome, as if in some vicarious way

their own grievances had been partially avenged!

Suddenly, without warning, every light went. A surprised silence fell, then a shot split the blackness, followed by a shriek of pain. Again the air was filled with shouting voices, and the crowd surged madly for the door. Men fell and were trampled underfoot, while behind them others pressed on, fighting and clawing their way toward the entrance. Two more shots, then Guthrie's voice rose cool and imperturbable. "Keep together, boys, close together, and hang on to North."

Another surge of human forms carried the rangers to the far side of the room, but like veterans they held their formation while Mills locked both hands around North's waist. So, shoulder to shoulder and without hurry, they made their way through that room of plunging, crying men until at last they emerged into the night outside.

Guthrie threw a blanket about North. "That looks like a fair specimen of Pogue's work," he commented. "Are you hurt?"

North shook his head.

Battered, dog tired, and still closely guarded by the rangers, Corrin was marched up the darkened street to Guthrie's home, where in spite of protests and with little ceremony he was put to bed.

"You're not getting out of my sight," Guthrie told him, "and you're not going back into town. I know what's happening down there. Your life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime if Pogue's outfit caught up with you."

And while North stretched his aching body on the bed upstairs, eight armed rangers sat around the fire below. Guthrie looked at them proudly.

"We might just as well figure on sitting up until daybreak, boys," he said. "This is the kind of night when anything's likely to happen."

And down in Wolfshead one or two things did happen—all of which Mills eagerly related an hour later when he returned to the Supervisor's house.

His eyes were bright with excitement. "The pot's boiling, Boss. One of the ranchers was shot when the lights went out and Long Williams has been telling the world at large what he thinks about the company. Sure called a spade a spade. Just about that time L'Abat's bunch got their snoots full of hooch

and decided to run the ranchers out of Sweeney's. Right there they all tangled in a general survival of the fittest that would of brought joy to the heart of an Apache warchief. One settler got cut with a knife, and two of the loggers are in the hospital, where Doc Mirov's trying to bring 'em back to this merry world again. Also, you'll be sorry to hear that according to the best medical authorities Mister L'Abat will reside in said hospital for the next two weeks."

"Good," a ranger growled. "What's he got?"

"Broken nose, couple of cracked ribs, and what they call minor complications—by which I hope they mean a dislocated spinal cord and concussion of the brain." Mills shook his head. "Very, very sad."

He pulled out a pipe. "I can sure smell trouble coming on the high lope. Those ranchers will take an awful lot of licking for just so long, but once they decide they're all fed up—hold your hat. Long Williams carries plenty weight with the old timers, and I saw a look in his eyes tonight that ain't spelling peace and comfort to Pogue. Why, if those——"

Out from the night a sound of hurrying footsteps came down the frozen road, and raising his hand Guthrie signalled for silence. That heavy rhythm of sound meant a dozen men or more, and into the minds of all flashed the same thought—*Pogue's crowd was coming for North.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

No one spoke. Quietly each ranger rose and reached back to loosen his holster flap. Outside the footsteps had ceased, but the creaking gate told Guthrie that men were coming up the walk, and beckoning his foresters to follow, he flung wide open the door.

There in the moonlight a group of loggers stood, and at sight of the opening door they took a step forward. But only a step. For just behind the door the burly forms of Guthrie's rangers blocked the entrance, and with a murmur of thwarted surprise the men stopped. Clearly they had not expected the foresters to be there in force, and while they hesitated Guthrie greeted them with cheery hospitality.

"Can't tell you how honored I am to see you boys. It's been

a long time since we've visited together. But the devil of it is I can't invite you in, for the house is so filled up with these young wildcats of mine there wouldn't be room for comfort."

Meanwhile Mills grinned over the Supervisor's shoulder. "I'll bet I know what brought you fellows," the ranger drawled. "I'll just bet little Jean is spoilin' for another fight, so he sent you here to see if Corrin wouldn't come down and play with him."

Like whipped dogs the loggers turned, and followed by Mills' dry chuckle, went out the gate. Lazily the ranger stretched and buttoned the flap on his holster.

"That ends that," he lamented. "There'll be nothing of interest now until the hearings."

North was awakened next morning by the faint sound of Guthrie opening the door.

"How's the giant-killer?" the Supervisor's voice boomed through the room.

North moved dubiously beneath the covers. "A little tender in spots, but otherwise sound."

"Good. In that case, let's rustle some breakfast. Helen's still up at the station, but I think I can scorch a couple Thanksgiving eggs."

It was while they were finishing their coffee that the phone rang, and Guthrie hurried into his office then almost immediately returned. His face was troubled.

"That call came from Helen, at Sheridan Creek Ranger Station," he said shortly. "She's been there with Cass."

"Is Cass up in the hills?"

The Supervisor nodded. "Corrin, those two days Mills made you hide out, that girl has been looking everywhere for you. No one knew where you were except Mills, and he didn't even tell me until yesterday afternoon. Helen says last night one of the loggers told them you'd left the country and were on your way to Jackson's Hole." Guthrie hesitated. "Cass started after you."

"At night?"

"Helen thinks Cass spent the night with Nan and left this morning for the divide. That's bad country for anyone to be caught in this time of year. I'm going to cut over the mountains and head her off."

But North had pushed back his chair. "No, you're not. That's

my job." Then in answer to the look on Guthrie's face, he added, "Don't worry. I'll be back in time for the hearings." He pulled on his mackinaw, reached for his mittens, and was gone.

But outside as North picked up his skis he heard a shout and the Supervisor came running down the steps.

"Those hearings haven't happened yet," Guthrie shook the snow from his own skis, "and until they do, I'm going to be devilish hard to shake."

Knowing how futile any objection would be, North turned without another word and the two men hurried through the town. Over the wooden bridge they made their way, passing no one, and at the edge of the foothills they strapped on their skis for the long climb ahead. It would be work from now on. Bending their backs to the task, taking advantage of the open, level stretches, they toiled upward for four hours without a word, avoiding all trails except at the Swede Camp, where North turned aside to learn that Cass had passed less than an hour before.

On they went, North doubling his pace to catch her before she reached the divide, and Guthrie, in spite of his utmost effort, was barely able to keep up that punishing pace. Plains and foothills had fallen away beneath them, and the sun was already high in the heavens when they left the lower reaches of forest behind and emerged upon an open park near timberline. There, almost on the very shoulder of the Rockies they paused for a moment's rest. Ceaselessly over eternal wastes of snow the winds of the world were moving, driving ice particles past like hissing sand, sweeping down over the frozen crust, causing the soft, feathery spruce tops to bow and nod unceasingly.

Then far to the left and a little below them, North caught sight of a slim figure steadily climbing the trail. He shouted, but the distance was too great, and he turned to the Supervisor.

"Wait here." And Guthrie understood.

Gathering speed, North glided swiftly out over that glassy surface, racing to reach her before she should enter the woods again. Stooping low, he felt the keen air whistle in his ears, but something more than the exhilaration of motion was whipping the blood to his cheeks, and with each second his pace quickened.

Near the edge of the forest Cass saw him. In glad amaze-

ment she halted, and as if all power had been taken from her, she waited, weak and motionless in the trail, eyes big with expectancy. Just above her North stopped, and kicking off his skis, stepped to her side.

Silent in the shadow of that frozen mountaintop they stood, while about them the restless winds tugged at their garments and whitened them with tiny particles of drifting snow. Hair disheveled, cheeks flushed, she looked very young and irresolute, and when at last she found her voice, it trembled in spite of her.

"They said you were going away. That you—had left us."

He shook his head. "Not without you, Cass. I told you I would never leave without you. It was you who tried to walk out of my life——"

Her face lowered. "I know."

"Why did you?"

"Because—I was afraid."

He smiled. "The girl who saved Nan and Buffalo from the fire was afraid? Were you afraid of me?"

"I was afraid of both of us—and yet perhaps most of all of you." She stood close before him. "I had never met a man like you, Corrin—never among all the men I have ever known—and in that one month—you swept me off my feet. It was a whirlwind, your love, a spell you laid around me. It was a spell of summertime, and of nights out there on the mesa, and I found it so easy to forget that back here was a man I had promised to marry. It wasn't fair."

"You didn't tell me of him."

"I know. We never told each other much of anything—it was as if we both conspired to forget whatever we hadn't shared." Wonderment crept into her voice. "At times I was able to forget that Bert Pogue and Wolfshead ever existed. I wanted to forget. I only know—Corrin, those days were the happiest days of my life. I couldn't admit that then—not even to myself. And when you asked me to marry you I told myself I would forget my promise to Bert, and forget what might happen to Dad's position here. But I couldn't. My heart wanted one thing, my loyalties wanted another, and night after night I struggled until I couldn't stand that never ending battle with myself. So the night before—" She stopped. "I left that hysterical note for you and came back here. I was afraid you'd follow

me—afraid and at the same time wildly hoping. Then months passed and I told myself you had forgotten. I tried to believe it was what I wanted, but happiness somehow had left me. And when you did come I tried to fight against you. I tried to turn my back on you, and for a while I thought I could. You were so sufficient to yourself—a very rock of a man. You didn't seem to need me or anyone, Corrin. I wasn't even sure you cared until I saw you trembling that day of the fire. But——"

"Go on," he urged gently.

"They told me you were going away. I knew then how little life would mean to me without you—and I realized—" Her eyes filled. "I realized you were all that mattered in my world. I had been listning to false voices, for even such things as duty and loyalty meant nothing beside the love you made me have for you more than a year ago. So," she ended simply, "I left Wolfshead to find you, to be with you, no matter who you are, no matter where you take me."

Stooping, he kissed her upturned face.

"Cass, we have many things to tell each other, that neither of us understood, but the greatest thing of all needs no telling."

"I know," she answered, "we love one another."

His arms were about her. He felt the warmth of her against him, felt the softness of her cheek against his, and lost to all sense of time, they stood enfolded while as in a fading dream the pain and heartache of those long months passed from them. All that remained was the great reality of their love, the imperishable fact that they were in each other's arms.

Slowly they walked back along the trail, and there at the forest's edge they stopped for the last time to look down across the glittering slopes of ice and snow to where the clustered homes of Wolfshead dotted the frozen river bank. In the calm air the smoke from a score of chimneys rose, and caught up by the beauty of that winter world they stood watching, heedless of passing moments until once again his face bent to hers.

"Guthrie is waiting for us," he nodded toward the far off slope. "We'll have to hurry to get to the hearings."

Reluctant to break the spell, she clung closer to him. "Are they so important, those hearings?"

He smiled. "Next to you they are the most important event of my life. Whatever the outcome, they mark the end of my long fight against the company. If I lose I will be a discredited

man, but win or lose, I love you and want you." Suddenly she felt his body tighten. "No, if I let them beat me I won't be worthy of a love like yours."

She drew down his face and kissed his lips. "Then go—and win."

## CHAPTER FORTY

By two o'clock that afternoon the great room in the commissary was crowded to the doors.

At the farther end a short, stocky man in his late forties had already seated himself behind a long table and was talking amiably with Pogue. "Ray Howard, the Governor's representative," men whispered to one another.

Actually he was more than that. Howard was one of the cleverest lawyers in the State of Wyoming—a good politician holding the not unimportant position of State Attorney. A man who knew where he was going and why. His enemies said of him that he was cold-blooded as a rattlesnake, that he thought of no one but Ray Howard, yet even they admitted he carried more votes among the widespread ranching population of Wyoming than any member of the Governor's cabinet. They admitted too that whatever recommendations he made were usually followed to the letter in Cheyenne. And perhaps it was for both these reasons the Governor had chosen this man to learn the true conditions up in Wolfshead and report back to the state capitol.

Pogue's face was more than usually serious that morning, and his long fingers kept playing restlessly with the watch-chain at his waist. Yet he looked about him coolly at the sea of faces that filled the commissary and nodded cordially to the three newspaper correspondents in the front row.

But once his eyes raised toward the back of the room, and instinctively he frowned to see North enter and lean against the wall. Others within the room saw North too and whispered to one another, recalling in low tones the battle of giants that had taken place only a few hours ago. And watching him they marveled that this calm-eyed, thoughtful man could be the same merciless fighter that battered Jean L'Abat into unconsciousness the night before. Showing no signs of that struggle, North stood there quietly, with folded arms, his own gaze

fixed on Howard—the arbiter who in a short time was to decide the destinies of the Wind River country.

But now Howard had risen, and nodding to his secretary, tapped on the table for order. The room hushed at once, and with the clear, easy voice of one long trained in the art of the spoken word, the Governor's representative began.

"Gentlemen, you all know the purpose of my visit. I shan't waste either your time or mine by repeating what the Governor has sent me here to do. I regret the necessity of holding hearings on Thanksgiving Day, but from many standpoints time is pressing. If the State of Wyoming is to protest the existence of the National Forests and is to assume leadership in any national movement to dissolve the system of federal forests and turn the lands back to the several states, it must become a part of our legislative program for the present year. For that reason I have requested that the meeting be held now.

"The problem for the Governor to decide is whether or not from the standpoint of Wyoming's future development these forest lands will be of greater usefulness as Federal reserves or as part of the great acreage already under state ownership. Mr. Pogue has presented what appeals to both the Governor and me as an exceedingly strong case. He points out that in numerous specific instances the Forest Service, with its far off headquarters in Washington, has been unable to cope with problems here, and that the work of his company has been repeatedly interfered with and retarded. Mr. Pogue's memorandum of complaint includes specifically the charge that the Forest Service is not even able to protect its own land from fire."

Howard's hands tapped a thick document upon the desk. "This is Mr. Pogue's memorandum. It has been read with much interest by the Governor and by the Congressional delegation to Washington. It has been referred to the Washington Office of the Forest Service, who while admitting that the ranger force on this timber sale has been inadequate, point out that Federal appropriations have compelled them to reduce the number of men not only here but everywhere."

Howard smiled toward Pogue. "I am not particularly interested in why the Forest Service fails to work with the North Continental. But it does seem that if the Federal Government is unwilling or unable to carry out its terms of contract in a businesslike manner, then it had best relinquish these lands

and see if the states are not better equipped to handle the forests properly. I do not know that this is so, but it would appear to be. My mind is still open on the matter, and I shall be glad to hear any of you who care to speak, provided, of course, your remarks have a direct bearing on the subject at hand. I shall, however, call first on one man—Mr. Corrin North."

A buzz of suppressed excitement passed through the room as North walked slowly down the aisle until he stood directly before the table where Pogue and Howard were seated. Tall and erect, he seemed to dominate the quietened room. A great calmness was over him, a poise that in itself stood forth as a symbol of strength, and yet his tanned cheeks glowed as he faced the table.

Howard looked up at him.

"I understand you have been in this country about a year. You have worked in the woods and are familiar with conditions. Tell me, Mr. North, would you say that the Forest Service has handled this sale satisfactorily?"

"No."

"Would you say that the rangers have been able to keep their work up to the point that the company has no right to complain?"

"No."

In consternation the settlers looked at each other. Was North too against the rangers?

"Then," Howard leaned forward to press his point, "would it not follow that the complaints of Mr. Pogue are just, and that the company has suffered from Forest Service inefficiency?"

Unhesitatingly North answered, "Yes, that would follow—except for one thing."

"And that is?"

"The criminal interference of Bert Pogue." The clear-spoken accusation drew a hushed gasp from the spectators. Howard's secretary half rose from his seat, and the three correspondents looked at one another—here was news! But unmindful of that sudden stir, North's voice went on.

"Within the past year Bert Pogue has used every means to prevent the Forest Service from carrying out its work—everything from threats, broken faith, lies, coercion and bribery to attempted murder. They have all been tried by the man who sits beside you in order to make the Forest Service appear in-

competent. His purpose is obvious. The Forest Service alone has stood between the company and the plums that would come to it if Pogue were able to have his unrestricted way with this land. Tear down the guard of the Forest Service, discredit it before the people, and the rewards to the company and to Pogue himself will be golden ones."

A frown had gathered on Howard's face. "Can you by any chance—" a trace of impatience was latent in his tone, "can you give some concrete proof for these statements? By themselves they might be only wild and baseless accusations."

"I think I can." North's eyes moved over the faces of row on row of silent spectators. "Do you mind if I ask one or two questions of Forest Ranger Mills?"

"Certainly not. These are public hearings."

From among the audience the ranger came forward.

"Harry, tell Mr. Howard about the trail of the man who set those fires."

At those unexpected words the audience stiffened, and Pogue's fingers ceased their playing with his watch chain.

Briefly Mills told a direct tale of how he and North had followed the trail that morning, how they found the bundles of matches and the dim tracks of a horse. He related how after North left him he trailed the rider to where the burlap coverings had been taken from the horse's feet.

"After that those tracks were plain enough," Mills went on. "I was able to get clear impressions. On one hoof the caulks had two parallel notches. That same day I compared them with the horse Jean L'Abat rides."

Howard glanced up. "And the result was?"

"The tracks were identical, sir."

"You have proof of this?"

Mills nodded. "I took plaster casts of those tracks on the trail, and I took some made by L'Abat's horse." Mills laid two small white plaster imprints on the table.

Howard glanced at them casually. "Who suggested that you do these things?" he asked.

For a second Mills was silent. "Corrin North," he answered at last.

"That's all. Thank you." Howard turned with a kind of speculative interest to the tall figure before him. "I shouldn't call this very conclusive evidence, Mr. North. Entirely too many

circumstantial features attach to it. Anyone else you would like to question?"

There may have been a lurking overtone of derision in Howard's voice, but North only answered, "Yes, I want Buffalo Lakin to say a word or two."

The bent old rancher limped forward.

"Buffalo, will you tell Mr. Howard what you told me about the big fire?"

The man's head had lowered, and very softly North added, "Who set that fire, Buffalo?"

"I did."

A gasp of dismay ran through the room.

"Who told you to set it?"

"Bert Pogue."

"That's a lie." Face twisted in rage, Pogue had started toward the old man, but with an impatient gesture Howard waved him to his seat.

"Go on, please," he nodded to Buffalo.

"I've got to go back a little," the faltering voice wavered. "I've been working for this company twelve years now, but I never been able to get ahead. Always I been in debt to them for grub or tools or harness for the team, and last winter, when I fell and hurt myself, I got still further behind. Then Bert Pogue, he offered to let me off on what I owed the company if I'd start a fire that would put the Forest Service so far back in its work they'd never catch up. I wouldn't do it, and one night he came up and told me that unless I came through I'd have to get out of the country." The slow voice died almost to silence. "I'm pretty old, and I got a kid to support, so—I done it."

Howard was watching him closely. "And what made you decide to admit your guilt? What persuaded you to lay yourself open to prosecution for a criminal act?"

Buffalo's head had raised. "Because in the night the wind turned on that fire and whipped it up Sheridan Creek where my cabin was. If it hadn't been for Cass Mirov, me and Nan would never of got out. It looked like I was getting what was coming to me. So I told Nan and she said I'd have to come clean no matter what happened. Then I told Corrin North, and now I've told you."

Broken and beaten, the old man turned, and leaning on North's arm, shuffled back to his seat. For a long time Howard

tapped the table with his pencil, eyes thoughtful, brow creased in a straight, deep line. At length he looked up at North. "Is there any further testimony you would like to present?"

"Just one more." North looked back among the spectators. "Nan Lakin," he called.

Instantly the girl stepped out from the crowd, walking fearlessly up to the table, her clear eyes unclouded and North's face softened as he watched her.

"Nan, do you remember that night in my cabin, when Pogue came in and you hid just outside?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Tell Mr. Howard what you heard Pogue say that night."

"Just a moment," Howard interrupted. "Why were you hiding outside Mr. North's cabin?"

"I came over to see Corrin and I heard Bert Pogue say something about Grandpop that scared me. So I hid."

"What was Mr. Pogue saying?"

"He was talking about making Grandpop help him in his plans."

"What were those plans?"

"He wanted to get the Forest Service."

Howard was leaning forward. "How?" he asked.

"I can't remember the exact words——"

"I don't care about the exact words. Just what do you remember, Miss Lakin?"

"Pogue was sore because the rangers were working night and day to keep up with the cutting. He wanted some way to slow them down. He said, I remember, 'They haven't even brains enough to take bribes. I've told L'Abat and his boys to bully them, and that helped a little, but not much. What I need is something to break down the whole system. I can make the Governor and his crowd believe what I want, but I got to have the real stuff before we start a Congressional investigation.' "

Howard's eyes had grown darker. "Was that substantially his statement, Miss Lakin?"

"It was mighty close to it."

"I think that will do. Thank you." His eyes fell coldly on Pogue. "Have you anything to offer in response to the testimony of these three people?" For the first time he spoke brusquely, clipping his words short, and sensing the dangerous change in Howard's tone, Pogue turned at bay.

"Why should I?" His eyes were blazing. "Surely you're not going to accept the statements of three irresponsible nobodies—a forest ranger whose job hangs on the results of this hearing, a doddering old man who could be made to say anything, and a kid whose testimony could be bought by anybody. For that matter, why should this wild tale of a drifting loafer have any weight against me?"

Howard's eyebrows raised. "Who is the drifting loafer, Mr. Pogue?"

"He stands in front of you. He calls himself Corrin North—a drifting, penniless troublemaker."

Acidly Howard smiled. "Your information about Mr. North seems to be on a par with the rest of your information. At present he happens to be a special investigator for the United States Forest Service."

Pogue's face went white. "That—" But a spasm of fury choked him. He could say no more.

"Perhaps," Howard turned to North, "perhaps you had better tell us just why you came here. We may need it for the record."

The room had stilled—every eye was on the tall man who stood before the desk.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I AM A FORESTER," North began. "Until two years ago I held the position of Forest Supervisor in New Mexico. At that time I applied for a year's leave, for I had always wanted to have practical first-hand experience in the lumber business, and when my leave was granted I became junior partner in a small lumber company back in the hills. For six months it went well—so well that it attracted the attention of the New Mexico branch of this company. They decided we were a dangerous competitor and the word was passed out to ruin us. They used almost the same tactics that I found later up here. Some of our timber they stole, they bullied our men and bribed others to get us into trouble. They undersold us, and in less than a year they had ruined us.

"I could have gone back with the Forest Service at once, but before I did I wanted to do one thing—I wanted to see if it was possible to strike at the heart of this octopus that had ruined me

and was ruining others throughout the Northern Rockies. So I took what little money I had left and went to Washington to lay the situation before the Chief Forester. He had heard of the North Continental's methods and in two hours gave me a confidential appointment as special investigator. He warned me to support every statement I made by affidavits of actual witnesses, since I had suffered too much at the hands of the company to be considered a disinterested agent. So for the next few months I went to the North Continental's camps and mill towns and picked up jobs there, and everywhere I went I kept my mouth closed and listened. The tale was always the same—the North Continental's ironclad policy was to put the little fellow out of business. At last I heard that one man was responsible for this policy and that he made his headquarters in Wolfshead. That same day I started."

"As a forester, weren't you in danger of detection by the rangers themselves?" Howard interrupted.

"Except for visiting inspectors, I felt I was fairly safe, for I had worked in a separate forest region, and rangers are rarely transferred out of their own region."

"I see. What happened then?"

"Fever got me in Northern Colorado and held me back, but I arrived—just one year ago yesterday—broke and still sick.

"I learned a lot within those next months. I learned so much that the day after the big fire I went to Denver and made a complete report that I sent to Washington." North smiled across the room at Mills. "My last report was phoned yesterday from Jackson's Hole." He turned toward Howard. "I can let you have copies of all of them. They include a number of affidavits from twelve of Pogue's own men who out of friendship for me have been willing to make a statement. They include also the testimony of Nan Lakin, Buffalo Lakin, and temporary employes of the company that Pogue ordered to cut illegal timber. I'd rather not use them unless I have to.

"Did Guthrie know you were an undercover agent?"

"No."

"Why not?"

For the first time North hesitated. "The Forest Service in Washington," he said at last, "realized that things were going badly between the company and the ranger force. It was possible the fault may have been Guthrie's. For that reason the

Chief Forester ordered me to tell no one my real position and to report fully and frankly on Supervisor Guthrie's handling of the situation. I have already reported that the Supervisor and every man on his force have brought nothing but credit to the Service."

North ceased. A hum of astonished wonder filled the room, then Long Williams stood up. "I'd just like to add," he drawled, "that if what you've heard ain't enough, there's about a dozen ranchers here who would like to back up Corrin North's story and add a little more of the same."

"Who are you?"

Williams grinned. "I'm the new sheriff."

"You liar!" Pogue burst out.

"Easy with that stuff." Williams' jaw thrust forward. "If I ain't sheriff here then Wolfshead don't own one. The boys elected me this morning. Your own pet skunk showed his judgment by pulling out for Lander."

With a gesture of finality Howard rose. "Gentlemen, I think it quite unnecessary to take further testimony. I can, of course, make no prediction as to what the Governor will say to all this, but I can assure everyone that the attempt to hoodwink the chief executive of this state and to maliciously discredit the Federal Forest Service will not be passed unnoticed. I think that is all, gentlemen. This meeting is dismissed."

The long fight was won! To the people of Wolfshead it was Thanksgiving Day indeed, and with one accord men were surging about North, pushing forward to shake his hand, thumping him on the back, rangers and ranchers rejoicing in a common victory.

Guthrie's hands were upon North's shoulders, and now he shook Corrin back and forth. "You scoundrel!" His eyes were twinkling. "I remember where I saw you before. It was at a meeting of foresters in Colorado. They pointed you out to me as the youngest Supervisor in the Service."

But Mills refused to be comforted. "It's plum' discouragin'," he told Corrin with lips that tried not to smile. "In another year or two I'd of made a swell ranger out of you. Now you'll be going back to New Mexico to scribble long-winded reports and look wise. Just another blinkin' Supervisor."

One by one loggers, ranchers and rangers filed down the aisle of the long room and out into the bright afternoon, but

within the commissary two men still stood by the table. Ray Howard gathered up the last of his papers, and as he turned in final parting to the silent figure in the gloom, he saw the tremor of Pogue's fingers, and his lip curled.

"I have always disliked being made a fool of." Howard's voice was glacial. "The Governor, I daresay, has the same peculiarity. Pogue, for reasons that we both know of, I came here prepared to lend a sympathetic ear to your petition. I happen also to number among my good friends two directors in your company. You were a coming man, Pogue, but you tried to be a little too clever, and today you're through. North was your Waterloo. He beat you at a game you thought you were master of. You played for big stakes and you lost, and there's nothing any of us can do to help you. Before tomorrow this hearing will be front page news in every paper of the West. Well, one of the elementary rules of life is never to get caught." Howard turned on his heel and left Pogue standing alone.

White hands clenched on the edge of the table, Pogue fought against the bitter truth—the realization that he had lost, that he had been beaten in a game with an empire at stake. The roar of a motor sounded, and he knew that Howard was leaving for the outside world, bearing with him all his hopes of victory. Dully he walked back to the office and took a long drink from the flask.

From across the street a burst of laughter rose, and to the man's distorted ears it rang with mockery. This, then, was the end. He was done, and tomorrow he was to face the cold condemnation of men who had been his friends, perhaps to stand a long, vindictive trial at the hands of political powers he had flouted. Disgrace—even prison.

He flung the empty flask from him, and as it shattered to pieces on the floor, he wheeled. Trembling in the doorway stood his clerk, little beads of perspiration on his lip.

"They're coming after you, Mr. Pogue. I heard 'em talking over at Sweeney's. A couple of forest rangers were trying to cool them down, but the settlers mean business."

Pogue jumped to the door. No one in sight. Running to his desk he opened a drawer and drew out a wallet stuffed with bills. His thin lips parted. "They'll be just a little too late."

"You're going down the road?"

Pogue shook his head. "They'd get me before I'd gone ten

miles. My skis are outside. Take them to the other side of the bridge. I'll be there waiting. I'm going where Williams' gang won't follow me." And his eyes rose to the distant pass.

. In terror the other grasped his arm. "You can't do it, Mr. Pogue. You can't make it in the dead of winter."

"I'll take that chance. By God, I'm not going to be manhandled, and I'm damned if I'll rot in any jail. On the other side of the divide I can get help." He pulled on his cap and was gone.

For three hours a crowd of grimfaced ranchers searched every hiding place in Wolfshead, and at last swept down upon Long Williams. "Pogue's quit the country," one shouted to the new sheriff. "He pulled out for the pass. We ain't through with that bird yet, and it's up to you to get a posse started."

But Williams was looking up toward the cloud-veiled summit of the Rockies, where swiftly, before a driving wind the first of the winter's savage blizzards gathered itself to swoop down across the divide. The days of tempest, of raging snows and freezing winds were upon them, and slowly Long Williams shook his head.

"We won't need a posse, boys. Right now Bert Pogue's reckoning with a mightier posse than any of us could ever raise."

Two other figures were watching those slanting snows. Alone in Doctor Mirov's study Cass and Corrin North stood at the window, while behind them crackled a glowing fire. Warmth and cheer filled the little room, and in the eyes of the girl lay the light of a great happiness.

And seeing that light, the man beside her whispered, "Tell me what you are thinking of."

Her eyes smiled up at him. "Of us," she answered, "of us and all the years ahead."

His lips touched her hair.

THE END

Now that you have finished this book, you will probably be interested in other POPULAR LIBRARY editions of successful novels and non-fiction books (formerly priced at $2 or more) now obtainable in this format at 25c per copy on all newsstands. Published by POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

POPULAR LIBRARY

Books of proven merit

# "DRAW!"

Bert Pogue flung himself behind Corrin North. Wrapping his arms around North's body, he shouted, "I've got him, Jean! Draw!" Glowering like a giant beast, Jean L'Abat lunged for his gun, exulting in the helplessness of the man he was going to kill . . . Bert Pogue was a big man in Wyoming, and his crooked lumber business spread its tentacles over the whole state. Ruthlessly he set out to destroy everyone who stood in his way. Above all he had to silence Corrin North, a dangerous man who knew too much about his dirty deals. Pogue and his brutal gun-hand, Jean L'Abat, stalked North to a lonely cabin. Easing their guns, they burst open the door— in time to see North embracing lovely Cass Mirov, the girl Pogue intended to marry . . .

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

POPULAR LIBRARY

complete • unabridged

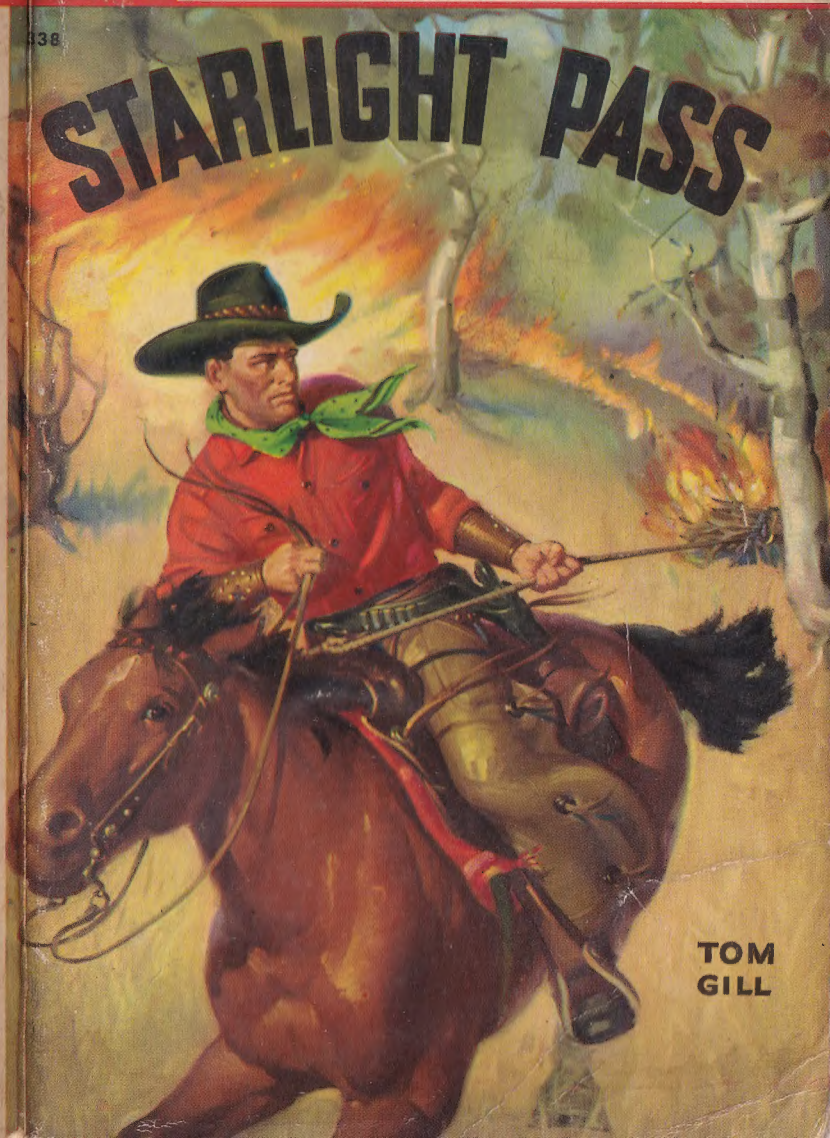
338 Tom Gill • STARLIGHT PASS • POPULAR LIBRARY

POPULAR LIBRARY

He Bucked An Outlaw Combine

338

# STARLIGHT PASS



TOM GILL